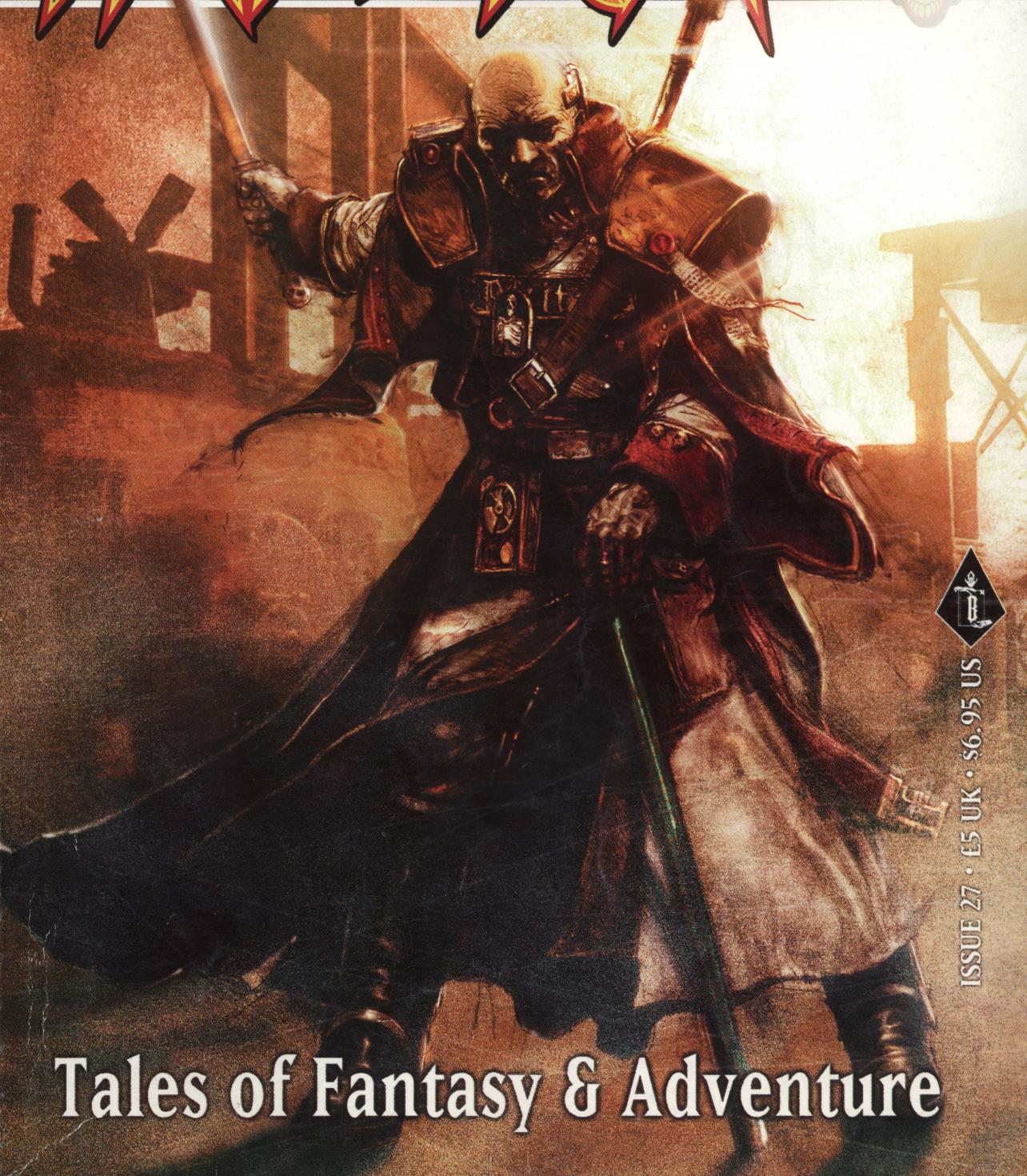


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NEVERLAND!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

BACK AT THE end of July, I was very saddened to read of the death of the venerable SF and Fantasy author, Poul Anderson. Do you know his work? He was one of the golden age writers whose work, often published in mass market 'pulp' magazines, was just the sort of wildly imaginative stuff I devoured when I was growing up. In more recent years his work had perhaps not been as fashionable and as hyped as some younger SF writers, but for those who really follow this genre he was a master.

But there's a far greater reason for honouring the name, and the work, of the late Poul Anderson. For starters, he was among the first to explore the concept of 'Law' and 'Chaos'. In his sardonic fantasy *Three Hearts & Three Lions*, he even mentions the symbol that the dark forces of Chaos wear upon their shields: the eight-pointed star. (The book's a tremendous read, if you can track down a copy – there was a US edition not so long ago, so perhaps an internet bookstore could help.)

The concepts of Law and Chaos were adopted wholesale by British writer

Michael Moorcock for his massively influential dark fantasy sagas featuring heroes like Elric, Corum, Hawkmoon and more. These books influenced many, many fantasy enthusiasts, to the extent that there are now generations of novels and games which use the concept of Chaos in one form or another.

The worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 are influenced by a vast range of novels, films, comic books and more, woven with our own new and innovative creations to form a brand new whole. Some, you might think, are obvious – look at the elves, perhaps. Plainly influenced by Tolkien's creations in *The Lord of the Rings*. Well, except that his elves were themselves drawn from German, Saxon and Celtic mythology, and of course these days Tolkien-esque elves are commonplace in all types of fantasy.

And if you have read Jes Goodwin's commentary to his creations in his Black Library-produced sketchbook, *The Gothic & the Eldritch*, you'll know he had a very different influence when sculpting the Warhammer high elves – those of Poul Anderson

again, this time from the darker, Celtic-inspired fantasy *The Broken Sword*.

ALL THE BEST stories draw on earlier influences; the trick is to be inspired by the best, and then to take the source on to a greater place. Just look at the original *Star Wars* – splendid film of course, but not totally unfamiliar to fans of 633 Squadron and Kurosawa's obscure classic *Hidden Fortress*.

These days it is the Black Library which is dishing up the truly wild pulp fiction for its many readers. It is great that our writers are inspired by splendid authors like Poul Anderson, Michael Moorcock and others.

Perhaps some of our writers will even invent concepts that will go on to influence further generations of writers and game designers. It's certainly going to be fun finding out.

Marco

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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CONTENTS

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4 Missing in Action

Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn, still recovering from the events at the end of *Xenos*, is drawn into the investigation of a series of grisly murders. With no obvious suspect, Eisenhorn would give his left hand to find out who the culprits are!

Story Dan Abnett • Illustration Clint Langley

18 The Nagenhof Bell

The quiet hamlet of Nagenhof, the perfect place for Torben Badenov and his brave band to rest, recuperate and catch up with old friends... at least until the skaven come along and spoil things.

Story Jonathan Green • Illustration Andrew Hepworth

37 Tales from the Ten-Tailed Cat

The Puppet Master's Tale. You'll never look at Punch & Judy in the same way again.

Script Christian Dunn • Art Richard Elson

42 Liberty

Left to rot on the prison planet Ghovul Vincularum by Colonel Schaeffer, Kage reaches breaking point and hatches a daring plot to break out – but at what cost?

Story Gav Thorpe • Illustration Simon Davis

56 Totentanz

Held captive by Cimejez, Lord of the Necropolis of Zelebzel, the vizier Amaimon is drawn into a macabre game where his soul – and the souls of his fellow captives – rests on the outcome of a bizarre dancing contest.

Story Brian Craig • Illustration Des Hanley

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MISSING IN ACTION

AN EISENHORN STORY
BY DAN ABNETT

I LOST MY left hand on Sameter. This is how it occurred. On the thirteenth day of Sagittar (local calendar), three days before the solstice, in the mid-rise district of the city of Urbitane, an itinerant evangelist called Lazlo Mombril was found shuffling aimlessly around the flat roof of a disused tannery lacking his eyes, his tongue, his nose and both of his hands.

Urbitane is the second city of Sameter, a declining agro-chemical planet in the Helican subsector, and it is no stranger to crimes of cruelty and spite brought on by the vicissitudes of neglect and social deprivation afflicting its tightly packed population. But this act of barbarity stood out for two reasons. First, it was no hot-blooded assault or alcohol-fuelled manslaughter but a deliberate and systematic act of brutal, almost ritual mutilation.

Second, it was the fourth such crime discovered that month.

I had been on Sameter for just three weeks, investigating the links between a bonded trade federation and a secessionist movement on Hesperus at the request of Lord Inquisitor Rorken. The links proved to be nothing – Urbitane's economic slough had forced the federation to chase unwise business with unscrupulous ship masters, and the real meat of the case lay on Hesperus – but I believe this was the Lord Inquisitor's way of gently easing me back into active duties following the long and arduous affair of the Necroteuch.

By the Imperial calendar it was 241.M41, late in that year. I had just finished several self-imposed months of recuperation, meditation and study on Thracian Primaris. The eyes of the daemonhost Cherubael still woke me some nights, and I wore permanent scars from torture at the hands of the sadist Gorgone Locke. His strousine neural scourge had damaged my nervous system and paralysed my face. I would not smile again for the rest of my life. But the

battle wounds sustained on KCX-1288 and 56-Izar had healed, and I was now itching to renew my work.

This idle task on Sameter had suited me, so I had taken it and closed the dossier after a swift and efficient investigation. But latterly, as I prepared to leave, officials of the Munitorium unexpectedly requested an audience.

I was staying with my associates in a suite of rooms in the Urbitane Excelsior, a shabby but well-appointed establishment in the high-rise district of the city. Through soot-stained, armoured roundels of glass twenty metres across, the suite looked out across the filthy grey towers of the city to the brackish waters of the polluted bay twenty kilometres away. Ornithopters and biplanes buzzed between the massive city structures, and the running lights of freighters and orbitals glowed in the smog as they swung down towards the landing port. Out on the isthmus, through a haze of yellow, stagnant air, promethium refineries belched brown smoke into the perpetual twilight.

'They're here,' said Bequin, entering the suite's lounge from the outer lobby. She had dressed in a demure gown of blue damask and a silk pashmeena, perfectly in keeping with my instruction that we should present a muted but powerful image.

I myself was clad in a suit of soft black linen with a waistcoat of grey velvet and a hip length black leather storm-coat.

'Do you need me for this?' asked Midas Betancore, my pilot and confidant.

I shook my head. 'I don't intend to be delayed here. I just have to be polite. Go on to the landing port and make sure the gun-cutter's readied for departure.'

He nodded and left. Bequin showed the visitors in.

I had felt it necessary to be polite because Eskeen Hansaard, Urbitane's Minister of Security, had come to see me himself. He was a massive man in a double-breasted brown tunic, his big frame offset oddly by his finely featured, boyish face. He was escorted by two bodyguards in grey, armour-ribbed uniforms and a short but handsome, black-haired woman in a dark blue bodyglove.

I had made sure I was sitting in an armchair when Bequin showed them in so I could rise in a measured, respectful way. I wanted them to be in no doubt who was really in charge here.

'Minister Hansaard,' I said, shaking his hand. 'I am Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn of the Ordo Xenos. These are my associates Alizebeth Bequin, Arbites Chastener Godwyn Fischig and savant Uber Aemos. How may I help you?'

'I have no wish to waste your time, inquisitor,' he said, apparently nervous in my presence. That was good, just as I had intended it. A case has been brought to my attention that I believe is beyond the immediate purview of the city arbites. Frankly, it smacks of warp-corruption, and cries out for the attention of the Inquisition.'

He was direct. That impressed me. A ranking official of the Imperium, anxious to be seen to be doing the right thing. Nevertheless, I still expected his business might be a mere nothing, like the affair of the trade federation, a local crime requiring only my nod of approval that it was fine for him to continue and close. Men like Hansaard are often over-careful, in my experience.

'There have been four deaths in the city during the last month that we believe to be linked. I would appreciate your advice on them. They are connected by merit of the ritual mutilation involved.'

'Show me,' I said.

'Captain?' he responded.

Arbites Captain Hurlie Wrex was the handsome woman with the short black hair. She stepped forward, nodded respectfully, and gave me a data-slate with the gold crest of the Adeptus Arbites on it.

'I have prepared a digested summary of the facts,' she said.

I began to speed-read the slate, already preparing the gentle knock-back I was expecting to give to his case. Then I stopped, slowed, read back.

I felt a curious mix of elation and frustration. Even from this cursorial glance, there was no doubt this case required the immediate attention of the Imperial Inquisition. I could feel my instincts stiffen and my appetites whetted, for the first time in months. In bothering me with this, Minister Hansaard was not being over careful at all. At the same time, my heart sank with the realisation that my departure from this miserable city would be delayed.



ALL FOUR victims had been blinded and had their noses, tongues and hands removed. At the very least.

The evangelist, Mombril, had been the only one found alive. He had died from his injuries eight minutes after arriving at Urbitane Mid-rise Sector Infirmary. It seemed to me likely that he had escaped his ritual tormentors somehow before they could finish their work.

The other three were a different story.

Poul Grevan, a machinesmith; Luthar Hewall, a rug-maker; Idilane Fasple, a mid-wife.

Hewall had been found a week before by city sanitation servitors during routine maintenance to a soil stack in the mid-rise district. Someone had attempted to burn his remains and then flush them into the city's ancient waste system, but the human body is remarkably durable. The post could not prove his missing body parts had not simply succumbed to decay and been flushed away, but the damage to the ends of the forearm bones seemed to speak convincingly of a saw or chain-blade.

When Idilane Fasple's body was recovered from a crawlspace under the roof of a mid-rise tenement hab, it threw more light on the extent of Hewall's injuries. Not only had Fasple been mutilated in the manner of the evangelist Mombril, but her brain, brainstem and heart had been excised. The injuries were

hideous. One of the roof workers who discovered her had subsequently committed suicide. Her bloodless, almost dessicated body, dried out – smoked, if you will – by the tenement's heating vents, had been wrapped in a dark green cloth similar to the material of an Imperial Guard-issue bedroll and stapled to the underside of the rafters with an industrial nail gun.

Cross-reference between her and Hewall convinced the arbites that the rug-maker had very probably suffered the removal of his brain stem and heart too. Until that point, they had ascribed the identifiable lack of those soft organs to the almost toxic levels of organic decay in the liquescent filth of the soil stack.

Graven, actually the first victim found, had been dredged from the waters of the bay by salvage ship. He had been presumed to be a suicide dismembered by the screws of a passing boat until Wrex's careful cross-checking had flagged up too many points of similarity.

Because of the peculiar circumstances of their various post mortem locations, it was pathologically impossible to determine any exact date or time of death. But Wrex could be certain of a window. Graven had been last seen on the nineteenth of Aquiarae, three days before his body had been dredged up. Hewall had delivered a finished rug to a high-rise customer on the twenty-fourth, and had dined that same evening with friends at a charcute in mid-rise. Fasple had failed to report for work on the fifth of Sagittar, although the night before she had seemed happy and looking forward to her next shift, according to friends.

'I thought at first we might have a serial predator loose in mid-rise,' said Wrex. 'But the pattern of mutilation seems to me more extreme than that. This is not feral murder, or even psychopathic, post-slaying depravity. This is specific, purposeful ritual.'

'How do you arrive at that?' asked my colleague, Fischig. Fischig was a senior arbiter from Hubris, with plenty of experience in murder cases. Indeed, it was his fluency with procedure and familiarity with modus operandi that had convinced me to make him a part of my band. That, and his ferocious strength in a fight.

Wrex looked sidelong at him, as if he was questioning her ability.

'Because of the nature of the dismemberment. Because of the way the remains were disposed of.' She looked at me. 'In my experience, inquisitor, a serial killer secretly wants to be found, and certainly wants to be known. It will display its kills with wanton openness, declaring its power over the community. It thrives on the terror and fear it generates. Great efforts were made to hide these bodies. That suggest to me the killer was far more interested in the deaths themselves than in the reaction to the deaths.'

'Well put, captain,' I said. 'That has been my experience too. Cult killings are often hidden so that the cult can continue its work without fear of discovery.'

'Suggesting that there are other victims still to find...' said Bequin casually, a chilling prophecy as it now seems to me.

'Cult killings?' said the minister. 'I brought this to your attention because I feared as much, but do you really think—'

'On Alphex, the warp-cult removed their victims' hands and tongues because they were organs of communication,' Aemos began. 'On Brettaria, the brains were scooped out in order for the cult to ingest the spiritual matter – the anima, as you might say – of their prey. A number of other worlds have suffered cult predations where the eyes have been forfeit... Gulinglas, Pentari, Hesperus, Messina... windows of the soul, you see. The Heretics of Saint Scarif, in fact, severed their ritual victims' hands and then made them write out their last confessions using ink quills rammed into the stumps of—'

'Enough information, Aemos,' I said. The minister was looking pale.

'These are clearly cult killings, sir,' I said. 'There is a noxious cell of Chaos at liberty in your city. And I will find it.'



I WENT AT once to the mid-rise district. Grevan, Hewall and Fasple had all been residents of that part of Urbitane, and Mombril, though a visitor to the metropolis, had been found there too.

Aemos went to the Munitorium records spire in high-rise to search the local archives. I was particularly interested in historical cult activity on Sameter, and on date significance. Fischig, Bequin and Wrex accompanied me.

The genius loci of a place can often say much about the crimes committed therein. So far, my stay on Sameter had only introduced me to the cleaner, high-altitude regions of Uribitane's high-rise, up above the smog-cover.

Mid-rise was a dismal, wretched place of neglect and poverty. A tarry resin of pollution coated every surface, and acid rain poured down unremittingly. Raw-engined traffic crawled nose to tail down the poorly lit streets, and the very stone of the buildings seemed to be rotting. The smoggy darkness of mid-rise had a red, firelit quality, the backwash of the flares from giant gas processors. It reminded me of picture-slate engravings of the Inferno.

We stepped from Wrex's armoured speeder at the corner of Shearing Street and Pentecost. The captain pulled on her arbites helmet and a quilted flak-coat. I began to wish for a hat of my own, or a rebreather mask. The rain stank like urine. Every thirty seconds or so an express flashed past on the elevated trackway, shaking the street.

'In here,' Wrex called, and led us through a shutter off the thoroughfare into the dank hallway of a tenement hab. Everything was stained with centuries of grime. The heating had been set too high, perhaps to combat the murky wetness outside, but the result was simply an overwhelming humidity and a smell like the fur of a mangy canine.

This was Idilane Fasple's last resting place. She'd been found in the roof.

'Where did she live?' asked Fischig.

'Two streets away. She had a parlour on one of the old court-habs.'

'Hewall?'

'His hab about a kilometre west. His remains were found five blocks east.'

I looked at the data-slate. The tannery where Mombril had been found was less than thirty minutes' walk from here, and Graven's home a short tram ride. The only thing that broke the geographical focus of

these lives and deaths was the fact that Graven had been dumped in the bay.

'I hasn't escaped my notice that they all inhabited a remarkably specific area,' Wrex smiled.

'I never thought it had. But "remarkably" is the word. It isn't just the same quarter or district. It's a intensely close network of streets, a neighbourhood.'

'Suggesting?' asked Bequin.

'The killer or killers are local too,' said Fischig.

'Or someone from elsewhere has a particular hatred of this neighbourhood and comes into it to do his or her killing,' said Wrex.

'Like a hunting ground?' noted Fischig.

I nodded. Both possibilities had merit.

'Look around,' I told Fischig and Bequin, well aware that Wrex's officers had already been all over the building. But she said nothing. Our expert appraisal might turn up something different.

I found a small office at the end of the entrance hall. It was clearly the cubbyhole of the habitat's superintendent. Sheaves of paper were pinned to the flak-board wall: rental dockets, maintenances rosters, notes of resident complaints. There was a box-tray of lost property, a partially disassembled mini-servitor in a tub of oil, a stale stink of cheap liquor. A faded ribbon and paper rosette from an Imperial shrine was pinned over the door with a regimental rank stud.

'What you doing in here?'

I looked round. The superintendent was a middle-aged man in a dirty overall suit. Details. I always look for details. The gold signet ring with the wheatear symbol. The row of permanent metal sutures closing the scar on his scalp where the hair had never grown back. The prematurely weathered skin. The guarded look in his eyes.

I told him who I was and he didn't seem impressed. Then I asked him who he was and he said 'The super. What you doing in here?'

I use my will sparingly. The psychic gift sometimes closes as many doors as it opens. But there was something about this man. He needed a jolt. 'What is your name?' I asked, modulating my voice to carry the full weight of the psychic probe.

He rocked backwards, and his pupils dilated in surprise.

'Quater Traves,' he mumbled.

'Did you know the midwife Fasple?'

'I sin her around.'

'To speak to?'

He shook his head. His eyes never left mine.

'Did she have friends?'

He shrugged.

'What about strangers? Anyone been hanging around the hab?'

His eyes narrowed. A sullen, mocking look, as if I hadn't seen the streets outside.

'Who has access to the roofspace where her body was found?'

'Ain't nobody bin up there. Not since the place bin built. Then the heating packs in and the contractors has to break through the roof to get up there. They found her.'

'There isn't a hatch?'

'Shutter. Locked, and no one has a key. Easier to go through the plasterboard.'

Outside, we sheltered from the rain under the elevated railway.

'That's what Traves told me too,' Wrex confirmed. 'No one had been into the roof for years until the contractors broke their way in.'

'Someone had. Someone with the keys to the shutter. The killer.'

The soil stack where Hewall had been found was behind a row of commercial properties built into an ancient skin of scaffolding that cased the outside of a toolfitters' workshop like a cobweb. There was what seemed to be a bar two stages up, where a neon signed flicked between an Imperial aquila and a fleur-de-lys. Fischig and Wrex continued up to the next scaffolding level to peer in through the stained windows of the habs there. Bequin and I went into the bar.

The light was grey inside. At a high bar, four or five drinkers sat on ratchet-stools and ignored us. The scent of obscura smoke was in the air.

There was a woman behind the counter who took exception to us from the moment we came in. She was in her forties, with a powerful, almost masculine build. Her vest was cut off at the armpits and her arms were as muscular as Fischig's. There was

the small tattoo of a skull and crossbones on her bicep. The skin of her face was weathered and coarse.

'Help you?' she asked, wiping the counter with a glass-cloth. As she did so I saw that her right arm, from the elbow down, was a prosthetic.

'Information,' I said.

She flicked her cloth at the row of bottles on the shelves behind her.

'Not a brand I know.'

'You know a man called Hewall?'

'No.'

'The guy they found in the waste pipes behind here.'

'Oh. Didn't know he had a name.'

Now I was closer I could see the tattoo on her arm wasn't a skull and crossbones. It was a wheatear.

'We all have names. What's yours?'

'Omin Lund.'

'You live around here?'

'Live is too strong a word.' She turned away to serve someone else.

'Scary bitch,' said Bequin as we went outside. 'Everyone acts like they've got something to hide.'

'Everyone does, even if it's simply how much they hate this town.'

The heart had gone out of Urbitane, out of Sameter itself, about seventy years before. The mill-hives of Thracian Primaris eclipsed Sameter's production, and export profits fell away. In an effort to compete, the authorities freed the refineries to escalate production by stripping away the legal restrictions on atmospheric pollution levels. For hundreds of years, Urbitane had had problems controlling its smog and air-pollutants. For the last few decades, it hadn't bothered any more.

My vox-earplug chimed. It was Aemos.

'What have you found?'

'It's most perturbatory. Sameter has been clear of taint for a goodly while. The last Inquisitorial investigation was thirty-one years ago standard, and that wasn't here in Urbitane but in Aquitane, the capital. A rogue psyker. The planet has its fair share of criminal activity, usually narcotics trafficking and the consequential mob-fighting. But nothing really markedly heretical.'

'Nothing with similarities to the ritual methods?'

'No, and I've gone back two centuries.'

'What about the dates?'

'Sagittar thirteenth is just shy of the solstice, but I can't make any meaning out of that. The Purge of the Sarpetal Hives is usually commemorated by upswings of cult activity in the subsector, but that's six weeks away. The only other thing I can find is that this Sagittar fifth was the twenty-first anniversary of the Battle of Klodeshi Heights.'

'I don't know it.'

'The sixth of seven full-scale engagements during the sixteen month Imperial campaign on Surealis Six.'

'Surealis... that's in the next damn subsector! Aemos, every day of the year is the anniversary of an Imperial action somewhere. What connection are you making?'

'The Ninth Sameter Infantry saw service in the war on Surealis.'

Fischig and Wrex had rejoined us from their prowl around the upper stages of the scaffolding. Wrex was talking on her own vox-set.

She signed off and looked at me, rain drizzling off her visor.

'They've found another one, inquisitor,' she said.



IT WASN'T ONE. It was three, and their discovery threw the affair wide open.

An old warehouse in the mill zone, ten streets away from Faspel's hab, had been damaged by fire two months before, and now the municipal work-crews had moved in to tear it down and reuse the lot as a site for cheap, prefab habitat blocks. They'd found the bodies behind the wall insulation in a mouldering section untouched by the fire. A woman and two men, systematically mutilated in the manner of the other victims.

But these were much older. I could tell that even at a glance.

I crunched across the debris littering the floorspace of the warehouse shell. Rain streamed in through the roof holes, illuminated as a blizzard of white specks by the cold blue beams of the arbites' floodlights shining into the place.

Arbites officers were all around, but they hadn't touched the discovery itself.

Mummified and shriveled, these foetally curled, pitiful husks had been in the wall a long time.

'What's that?' I asked.

Fischig leaned forward for a closer look. 'Adhesive tape, wrapped around them to hold them against the partition. Old. The gum's decayed.'

'That pattern on it. The silver flecks.'

'I think it's military issue stuff. Matt-silver coating, you know the sort? The coating's coming off with age.'

'These bodies are different ages,' I said.

'I thought so too,' said Fischig.



WE HAD TO wait six hours for a preliminary report from the district Examiner Medicae, but it confirmed our guess. All three bodies had been in the wall for at least eight years, and then for different lengths of time. Decompositional anomalies showed that one of the males had been in position for as much as twelve years, the other two added subsequently, at different occasions. No identifications had yet been made.

'The warehouse was last used six years ago,' Wrex told me.

'I want a roster of workers employed there before it went out of business.'

Someone using the same m.o. and the same spools of adhesive tape had hidden bodies there over a period of years.



THE DISUSED tannery where poor Mombril had been found stood at the junction between Xerxes Street and a row of slum tenements known as the Pilings. It was a fetid place, with the stink of

the lye and coroscutum used in the tanning process still pungent in the air. No amount of acid rain could wash that smell out.

There were no stairs. Fischig, Bequin and I climbed up to the roof via a metal fire-ladder.

'How long does a man survive mutilated like that?'

'From the severed wrists alone, he'd bleed out in twenty minutes, perhaps,' Fischig estimated. 'Clearly, if he had made an escape, he'd have the adrenalin of terror sustaining him a little.'

'So when he was found up here, he can have been no more than twenty minutes from the scene of his brutalisation.'

We looked around. The wretched city looked back at us, close packed and dense. There were hundreds of possibilities. It might take days to search them all.

But we could narrow it down. 'How did he get on the roof?' I asked.

'I was wondering that,' said Fischig.

'The ladder we came up by...' Bequin trailed off as she realised her gaffe.

'Without hands?' Fischig smirked.

'Or sight,' I finished. 'Perhaps he didn't escape. Perhaps his abusers put him here.'

'Or perhaps he fell,' Bequin said, pointing.

The back of a tall warehouse overshadowed the tannery to the east. Ten metres up there were shattered windows.

'If he was in there somewhere, fled blindly, and fell through onto this roof...'

'Well reasoned, Alizebeth,' I said.

The arbites had done decent work, but not even Wrex had thought to consider this inconsistency.

We went round to the side entrance of the warehouse. The battered metal shutters were locked. A notice pasted to the wall told would-be intruders to stay out of the property of Hundlemas Agricultural Stowage.

I took out my multi-key and disengaged the padlock. I saw Fischig had drawn his sidearm.

'What's the matter?'

'I had a feeling just then... like we were being watched.'

We went inside. The air was cold and still and smelled of chemicals. Rows of storage vats filled with chemical fertilisers lined the echoing warehall.

The second floor was bare-boarded and hadn't been used in years. Wiremesh had been stapled over a doorway to the next floor, and rainwater dripped down. Fischig pulled at the mesh. It was cosmetic only, and folded aside neatly.

Now I drew my autopistol too.

On the street side of the third floor, which was divided into smaller rooms, we found a chamber ten metres by ten, on the floor of which was spread a sheet of plastic smeared with old blood and other organic deposits. There was a stink of fear.

'This is where they did him,' Fischig said with certainty.

'No sign of cult markings or Chaos symbology,' I mused.

'Maybe not,' said Bequin, crossing the room, being careful not to step on the smeared plastic sheet. For the sake of her shoes, not the crime scene, I was sure. 'What's this? Something was hung here.'

Two rusty hooks in the wall, scraped enough to show something had been hanging there recently. On the floor below was a curious cross drawn in yellow chalk.

'I've seen that before somewhere,' I said. My vox bleeped. It was Wrex.

'I've got that worker roster you asked for.'

'Good. Where are you?'

'Coming to find you at the tannery, if you're still there.'

'We'll meet you on the corner of Xerxes Street. Tell your staff we have a crime scene here in the agricultural warehouse.'

We walked out of the killing room towards the stairwell.

Fischig froze, and brought up his gun.

'Again?' I whispered.

He nodded, and pushed Bequin into the cover of a door jamb.

Silence, apart from the rain and the scurry of vermin. Gun braced, Fischig looked up at the derelict roof. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed as if a shadow had moved across the bare rafters.

I moved forward, scanning the shadows with my pistol.

Something creaked. A floorboard.

INFERNO! —

Fischig pointed to the stairs. I nodded I understood, but the last thing I wanted was a mistaken shooting. I carefully keyed my vox and whispered, 'Wrex. You're not coming into the warehouse to find us, are you?'

'Negative, inquisitor.'

'Standby.'

Fischig had reached the top of the staircase. He peered down, aiming his weapon.

Las fire erupted through the floorboards next to him and he threw himself flat.

I put a trio of shots into the mouth of the staircase, but my angle was bad.

Two hard round shots spat back up the stairs and then the roar and flash of the las came again, raking the floor.

From above, I realised belatedly. Whoever was on the stairs had a hard-slug side arm, but the las fire was coming down from the roof.

I heard steps running on the floor below. Fischig scrambled up to give chase but another salvo of las fire sent him ducking again.

I raised my aim and fired up into the roof tiles, blowing out holes through which the pale light poked.

Something slithered and scrambled on the roof.

Fischig was on the stairs now, running after the second assailant.

I hurried across the third floor, following the sounds of the man on the roof.

I saw a silhouette against the sky through a hole in the tiles and fired again. Las-fire replied in a bright burst, but then there was a thump and further slithering.

'Cease fire! Give yourself up! Inquisition!' I bellowed, using the will.

There came a much more substantial crash sounding like a whole portion of the roof had come down. Tiles avalanched down and smashed in a room nearby.

I slammed into the doorway, gun aimed, about to yell out a further will command. But there was no one in the room. Piles of shattered roofoles and bricks covered the floor beneath a gaping hole in the roof itself, and a battered lasrifle lay amongst the debris. On the far side of the room were some of the broken windows that Bequin had pointed out as overlooking the tannery roof.

I ran to one. Down below, a powerful figure in dark overalls was running for cover. The killer, escaping from me in just the same way his last victim had escaped him – through the windows onto the tannery roof.

The distance was too far to use the will again with any effect, but my aim and angle were good. I lined up on the back of the head a second before it disappeared, began to apply pressure –

– and the world exploded behind me.



I CAME ROUND cradled in Bequin's arms. 'Don't move, Eisenhorn. The medics are coming.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'Booby trap. The gun that guy left behind? It exploded behind you. Powercell overload.'

'Did Fischig get his man?'

'Of course he did.'

He hadn't, in fact. He'd chased the man hard down two flights of stairs and through the main floor of the warehall. At the outer door onto the street, the man had wheeled around and emptied his autopistol's clip at the chastener, forcing him into cover.

Then Captain Wrex, approaching from outside, had gunned the man down in the doorway.



WE ASSEMBLED in Wrex's crowded office in the busy Arbites Mid-Rise Sector-house. Aemos joined us, laden down with papers and data-slates, and brought Midas Betancore with him.

'You all right?' Midas asked me. In his jacket of embroidered cerise silk, he was a vivid splash of colour in the muted gloom of mid-rise.

'Minor abrasions. I'm fine.'

'I thought we were leaving, and here you are having all the fun without me.'

'I thought we were leaving too until I saw this case. Review Bequin's notes. I need you up to speed.'

Aemos shuffled his ancient, augmetically assisted bulk over to Wrex's desk and dropped his books and papers in an unceremonious pile.

'I've been busy,' he said.

'Busy with results?' Bequin asked.

He looked at her sourly. 'No, actually. But I have gathered a commendable resource of information. As the discussion advances, I may be able to fill in blanks.'

'No results, Aemos? Most perturbatory,' grinned Midas, his white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. He was mocking the old savant by using Aemos's favourite phrase.

I had before me the work roster of the warehouse where the three bodies had been found, and another for the agricultural store where our fight had occurred. Quick comparison brought up two coincident names.

'Brell Sodakis. Vim Venik. Both worked as warehousemen before the place closed down. Now they're employed by Hundlemas Agricultural Stowage.'

'Backgrounds? Addresses?' I asked Wrex.

'I'll run checks,' she said.

'So... we have a cult here, eh?' Midas asked. 'You've got a series of ritual killings, at least one murder site, and now the names of two possible cultists.'

'Perhaps.' I wasn't convinced. There seemed both more and less to this than had first appeared. Inquisitorial hunch.

The remains of the lasrifle discarded by my assailant lay on an evidence tray. Even with the damage done by the overloading powercell, it was apparent that this was an old model.

'Did the powercell overload because it was dropped? It fell through the roof, didn't it?' Bequin asked.

'They're pretty solid,' Fischig answered.

'Forced overload,' I said. 'An old Imperial Guard trick. I've heard they learn how to set one off. As a last ditch in tight spots. Cornered. About to die anyway.'

'That's not standard,' said Fischig, poking at the trigger guard of the twisted weapon. His knowledge of guns was sometimes

unseemly. 'See this modification? It's been machine-tooled to widen the guard around the trigger.'

'Why?' I asked.

Fischig shrugged. 'Access? For an augmetic hand with rudimentary digits?'

We went through to a morgue room down the hall where the man Wrex had gunned down was lying on a slab. He was middle-aged, with a powerful frame going to seed. His skin was weatherbeaten and lined.

'Identity?'

'We're working on it.'

The body had been stripped by the morgue attendants. Fischig scrutinised it, rolling it with Wrex's help to study the back. The man's clothes and effects were in plasteen bags in a tray at his feet. I lifted the bag of effects and held it up to the light.

'Tattoo,' reported Fischig. 'Imperial eagle, left shoulder. Crude, old. Letters underneath it... capital S period, capital I period, capital L, capital X.'

I'd just found the signet ring in the bag. Gold, with a wheatear motif.

'S.I. IX,' said Aemos. 'Sameter Infantry Nine.'



THE NINTH Sameter Infantry had been founded in Urbitane twenty-three years before, and had served, as Aemos had already told me, in the brutal liberation war on Surealis Six. According to city records, five hundred and nineteen veterans of that war and that regiment had been repatriated to Sameter after mustering out thirteen years ago, coming back from the horrors of war to an increasingly depressed world beset by the blight of poverty and urban collapse. Their regimental emblem, as beffited a world once dominated by agriculture, was the wheatear.

'They came back thirteen years ago. The oldest victim we have dates from that time,' said Fischig.

'Surealis Six was a hard campaign, wasn't it?' I asked.

Aemos nodded. 'The enemy was dug in. It was ferocious, brutal. Brutalising. And the climate. Two white dwarf suns, no cloud cover. The most punishing heat and light, not to mention ultraviolet burning.'

'Ruins the skin,' I murmured. 'Makes it weatherbeaten and prematurely aged.'

Everyone looked at the taut, lined face of the body on the slab.

'I'll get a list of the veterans,' volunteered Wrex.

'I already have one,' said Aemos.

'I'm betting you find the names Brell Sodakis and Vim Venik on it,' I said.

Aemos paused as he scanned. 'I do,' he agreed.

'What about Quater Traves?'

'Yes, he's here. Master Gunnery Sergeant Quater Traves.'

'What about Omin Lund?'

'Umm... yes. Sniper first class. Invalided out of service.'

'The Sameter Ninth were a mixed unit, then?' asked Bequin.

'All our Guard foundings are,' Wrex said proudly.

'So, these men... and women...' Midas mused. 'Soldiers, been through hell. Fighting the corruption... your idea is they brought it back here with them? Some taint? You think they were infected by the touch of the warp on Surealis and have been ritually killing as a way of worship back here ever since?'

'No,' I said. 'I think they're still fighting the war.'



IT REMAINS A sad truth of the Imperium that no virtually no veteran ever comes back from fighting its wars intact. Combat alone shreds nerves and shatters bodies. But the horrors of the warp, and of foul xenos forms like the tyranid, steal sanity forever, and leave veterans fearing the shadows, and the night and, sometimes, the nature of their friends and neighbours, for the rest of their lives.

The guards of the Ninth Sameter Infantry had come home thirteen years before, broke by a savage war against

mankind's arch-enemy and, through their scars and their fear, brought their war back with them.

The arbites mounted raids at once on the addresses of all the veterans on the list, those that could be traced, those that were still alive. It appeared that skin cancer had taken over two hundred of them in the years since their repatriation. Surealis had claimed them as surely as if they had fallen there in combat.

A number were rounded up. Bewildered drunks, cripples, addicts, a few honest men and women trying diligently to carry on with their lives. For those latter I felt especially sorry.

But about seventy could not be traced. Many may well have disappeared, moved on, or died without it coming to the attention of the authorities. But some had clearly fled. Lund, Traves, Sodakis, Venik for starters. Their habs were found abandoned, strewn with possessions as if the occupant had left in a hurry. So were the habs of twenty more belonging to names on the list.

The arbites arrived at the hab of one, ex-corporal Geffin Sancto, in time to catch him in the act of flight. Sancto had been a flamer operator in the guard, and like so many of his kind, had managed to keep his weapon as a memento. Screaming the battlecry of the Sameter Ninth, he torched four arbites in the stairwell of his building before the tactical squads of the judiciary vaporised him in a hail of gunshots.

WHY ARE they killing?' Bequin asked me. 'All these years, in secret ritual?'

'I don't know.'

'You do, Eisenhorn. You so do!'

'Very well. I can guess. The fellow worker who jokes at the Emperor's expense and makes your fragile sanity imagine he is tainted with the warp. The rug-maker whose patterns suggest to you the secret encoding of Chaos symbols. The midwife you decide is spawning the offspring of the arch-enemy in the mid-rise maternity hall.'

The travelling evangelist who seems just too damn fired up to be safe.'

She looked down at the floor of the land speeder. 'They see daemons everywhere.'

'In everything. In every one. And, so help them, they believe they are doing the Emperor's work by killing. They trust no one, so they daren't alert the authorities. They take the eyes, the hands and the tongue... all the organs of communication, any way the arch-enemy might transmit his foul lies. And then they destroy the brain and heart, the organs which common soldier myth declares must harbour daemons.'

'So where are we going now?' she asked.

'Another hunch.'



THE GUILDHALL of the Sameter Agricultural Fraternity was a massive ragstone building on Furnace Street, its facade decaying from the ministrations of smog and acid rain. It had been disused for over two decades.

Its last duty had been to serve as a recruitment post of the Sameter Ninth during the founding. In its long hallways, the men and women of the Ninth had signed their names, collected their starchy new fatigues, and pledged their battle oath to the God-Emperor of mankind.

At certain times, under certain circumstances, when a proper altar to the Emperor is not available, guard officers improvise in order to conduct their ceremonies. An Imperial eagle, an aquila standard, is suspended from a wall, and a sacred spot is marked on the floor beneath in yellow chalk.

The guildhall was not a consecrated building. The founding must have been the first time the young volunteers of Urbitane had seen that done. They'd made their vows to a yellow chalk cross and a dangling aquila.

Wrex was leading three fireteams of armed arbites, but I went in with Midas and Fischig first, quietly. Bequin and Aemos stayed by our vehicle.

Midas was carrying his matched needle pistols, and Fischig an auto shotgun. I clipped a slab-pattern magazine full of fresh rounds into the precious bolt pistol given to me by Librarian Brytnoth of the Adeptus Astartes Deathwatch chapter.

We pushed open the boarded doors of the decaying structure and edged down the dank corridors. Rainwater pattered from the roof and the marble floor was spotted and eaten by collected acid.

We could hear the singing. A couple of dozen voices voicing up the Battle Hymn of the Golden Throne.

I led my companions forward, hunched low. Through the crazed windows of an inner door we looked through into the main hall. Twenty-three dishevelled veterans in ragged clothes were knelt down in ranks on the filthy floor, their heads bowed to the rusty Imperial eagle hanging on the wall as they sang. There was a yellow chalk cross on the floor under the aquila. Each veteran had a backpack or rucksack and a weapon by their feet.

My heart ached. This was how it had gone over two decades before, when they came to the service, young and fresh and eager. Before the war. Before the horror.

'Let me try... try to give them a chance,' I said.

'Gregor!' Midas hissed.

'Let me try, for their sake. Cover me.'

I slipped into the back of the hall, my gun lowered at my side, and joined in the verse.

One by one, the voices died away and bowed heads turned sideways to look at me. Down the aisle, at the chalk cross of the altar, Lund, Traves and a bearded man I didn't know stood gazing at me.

In the absence of other voices, I finished the hymn.

'It's over,' I said. 'The war is over and you have all done your duty. Above and beyond the call.'

Silence.

'I am Inquisitor Eisenhorn. I'm here to relieve you. The careful war against the blight of Chaos that you have waged through Urbitane in secret is now over. The Inquisition is here to take over. You can stand down.'

Two or three of the hunched veterans began to weep.

'You lie,' said Lund, stepping forward.

'I do not. Surrender your weapons and I promise you will be treated fairly and with respect.'

'Will...will we get medals?' the bearded man asked, in a quavering voice.

'The gratitude of the God-Emperor will be with you always.'

More were weeping now. Out of fear, anxiety or plain relief.

'Don't trust him!' said Traves. 'It's another trick!'

'I saw you in my bar,' said Lund, stepping forward. 'You came in looking.' Her voice was empty, distant.

'I saw you on the tannery roof, Omin Lund. You're still a fine shot, despite the hand.'

She looked down at her prosthetic with a wince of shame.

'Will we get medals?' the bearded man repeated, eagerly. Traves turned on him. 'Of course we won't, Spake, you cretin! He's here to kill us!'

'I'm not-' I began.

'I want medals!' the bearded man, Spake, screamed suddenly, sliding his laspistol up from his belt with the fluid speed only a trained soldier can manage.

I had no choice.

His shot tore through the shoulder padding of my storm coat. My bolt exploded his head, spraying blood across the rusty metal eagle on the wall.

Pandemonium.

The veterans leapt to their feet firing wildly, scattering, running.

I threw myself flat as shots tore out the wall plaster behind me. At some point Fischig and Midas burst in, weapons blazing. I saw three or four veterans drop, sliced through by silent needles and another six tumble as shotgun rounds blew them apart.

Traves came down the aisle, blasting his old service-issue lasrifle at me. I rolled and fired, but my shot went wide. His face distorted as a needle round punched through it and he fell in a crumpled heap.

Wrex and her fireteams exploded in. Flames from some spilled accelerants billowed up the wall.

I got up, and then was throw back by a las shot that blew off my left hand.

Spinning, falling, I saw Lund, struggling to make her prosthetic fingers work the unmodified trigger of Traves's lasgun.

My bolt round hit her with such force she flew back down the aisle, hit the wall, and tore the Imperial aquila down.



NOT A SINGLE veteran escaped the Guildhall alive. The firefight raged for two hours. Wrex lost five men to the experienced guns of the Sameter Ninth veterans. They stood to the last. No more can be said of any Imperial Guard unit.



THE WHOLE affair left me sour and troubled. I have devoted my life to the service of the Imperium, to protect it against its manifold foes, inside and out.

But not against its servants. However misguided, they were loyal and true. However wrong, they were shaped that way by the service they had endured in the Emperor's name.

Lund cost me my hand. A hand for a hand. They gave me a prosthetic on Sameter. I never used it. For two years, I made do with a fused stump. Surgeons on Messina finally gave me a fully functional graft.

I consider it still a small price to pay for them.

I have never been back to Sameter. Even today, they are still finding the secreted, hidden bodies. So very many, dead in the Emperor's name. ☐

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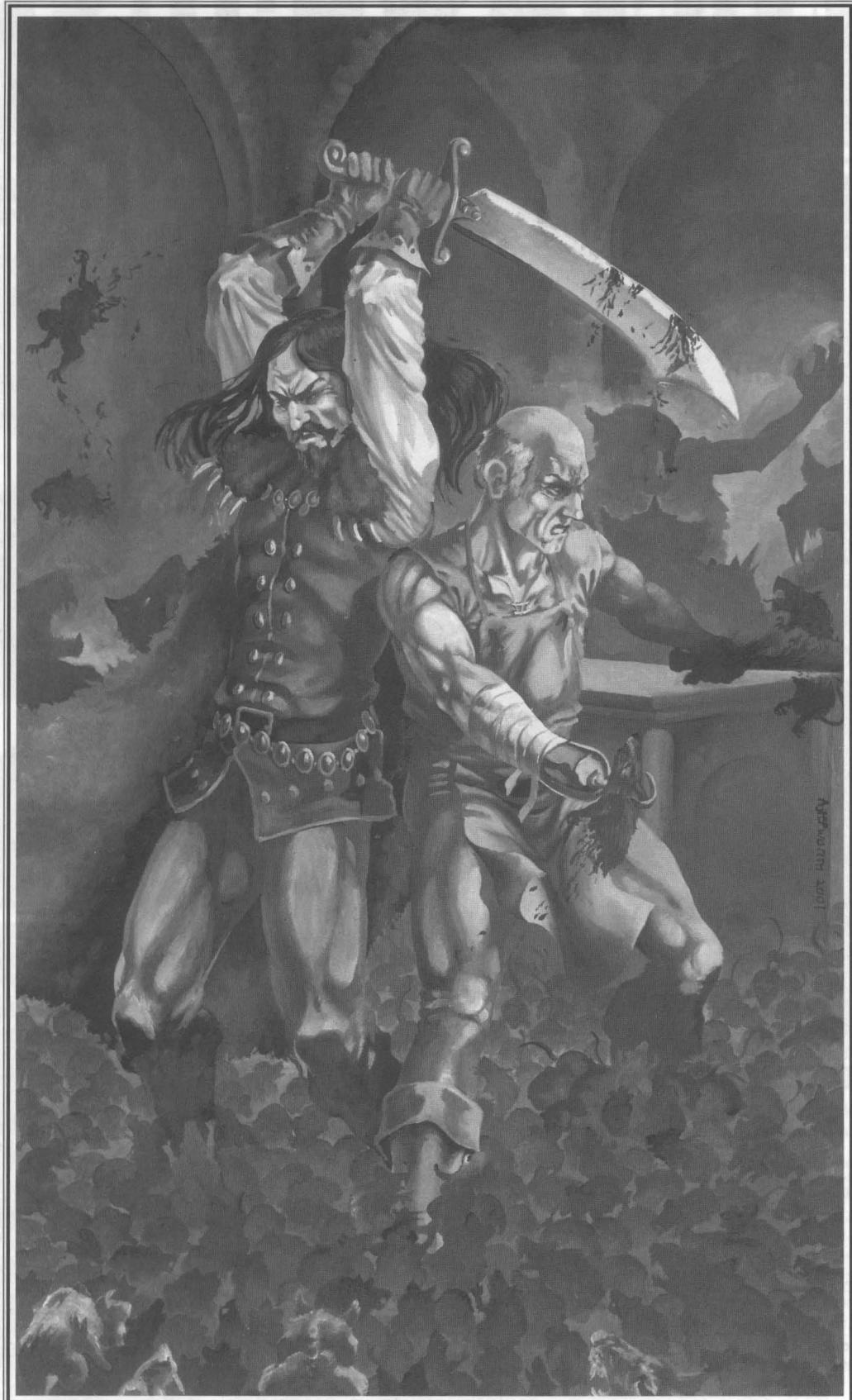
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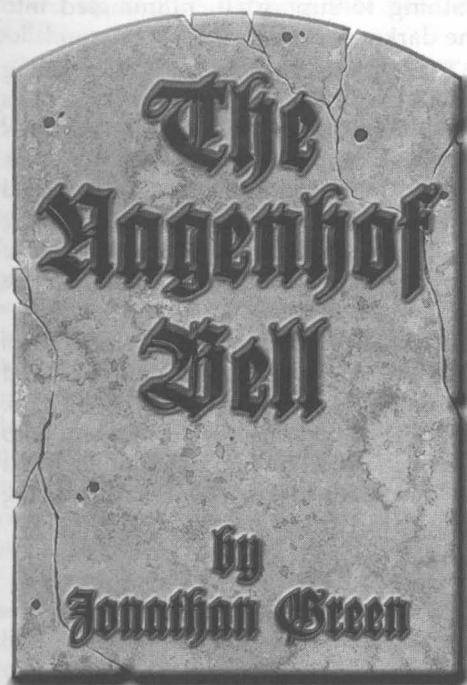
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THUNDER ROLLED over the sleeping market town of Nagenhof, like the grumbling of angry giants. Under the roiling storm clouds the night was as black as the raven of Morr, god of death, himself. The wind, howling like a banshee, whipped around the rooftops and along the main street to the forbidding edifice at its end. The church of Morr appeared to be even blacker than the night shrouding it: black as the eternal night of oblivion. Above the gaping, open doors of the sanctuary the bell-tower loomed over the town like the ruler of the underworld himself surveying the harvest of souls he would inevitably reap. The doors were open even at this time of night and in such weather: the doors to the church of Morr were always open, just as the portal to Morr's kingdom was always open. The dark, brooding structure, with its one hundred-foot tall bell-tower, was taller by far than any other building in all Nagenhof.

Heavy raindrops beat a tattoo on the slates of the church roof and a wailing squall blew rain and leaves under the eaves of the belfry. The three figures labouring there blinked the rain from their eyes and continued to struggle with

rope gripped in their straining clutches. With each heave the great bell suspended from it rose closer to its final resting-place.

The first man had a dark complexion, and a week's growth of stubble, while the second was taller with a gangling frame. Both gave the appearance of being people who weren't inclined to ask too many questions, if the money was right. The third was as hunched and deformed as sin itself but his hideous appearance did nothing to belie the obvious strength of his great twisted frame.

Accompanied by a cry of, 'Ho!' the rain-slicked rope slipped in the swarthy man's grasp and the great bronze bell dropped back several feet. Feeling the weight of the bell pull suddenly on his tired arms he let go of the rope altogether. His companion stumbled towards the square hole in the belfry floor before doing the same. The hulking hunchback was left holding the great bell on his own. With a growling roar, muscles corded beneath his skin, he hauled on the rope. The bell's descent was halted with a jerk, causing the clapper to swing against the side of the bell. It struck the dull greening bronze with a dull clang! The two men gagged as a sickening wave of nausea swept over them.

Otto the hunchback glowered at the two rogues with his good right eye. The eye bulged, as if barely contained in its socket, while the lid over the left one remained tightly shut. 'Take the rope!' Otto growled through clenched teeth, his face reddening. His speech was distorted by a mouth as malformed as the rest of his body. Hastily the rogues grabbed hold of the rope again and this time didn't let go until the bell was secured in position at the top of the belfry.

Transfixed, Otto gazed in wonder at the great, cracked, bronze bell suspended before him. The metal it had been cast from glittered with tiny, black-green, crystalline particles. A number of incomprehensible jagged runes adorned the strange artefact. Perhaps they were part of the original casting, perhaps they had been etched on afterwards; it was impossible to tell. It was a work of perverse beauty and insane craftsmanship. He was

shaken from his awed reverie by a cough from the swarthy man. 'What?' he asked gruffly.

'Our payment?' the rogue reminded him. 'You said the old priest had a stack of money hidden away. A fortune taken from the collection plate, you said.'

'Yeah, and we want our share of it,' the taller man added.

'Ah yes,' Otto said, suddenly adjusting his manner. 'I have it here,' he added, reaching inside the sackcloth bag tied at his belt.

The swarthy man moved forward in greedy anticipation. 'Yes, here it is,' Otto spluttered and thrust his hand into the rogue's stomach. The man gasped and staggered backwards, the bloodied dagger in Otto's hand slipping free of his victim's doublet.

The rogue fell to his knees, hands pressed to the fatal wound. His companion saw the hunchback's blade and started to back away nervously, glancing from side-to-side, trying to locate the staircase that descended to the nave of the church below. Otto capered towards the tall man, keeping his bulk between the hole in the belfry floor and his quarry, guarding the only escape route. The first man slumped to the belfry floor with a gurgling moan and then was silent.

With a bellow the hunchback lunged. The panicked man sidestepped agilely and struck Otto's arm a double-fisted blow, sending the dagger clattering to the floor. Not waiting to see what his companion's killer would do next the gangling rogue launched himself across the belfry.

Before he had gone two yards a long arm swung round and clubbed him across the back of the head. The blow sent the man reeling. Barely able to keep his balance he stumbled closer to the bell and the gaping hole beneath it. With a bound Otto was behind him. A hand like a sexton's spade slammed the man's face into the side of the bell. There was a crack as the man's nose broke followed closely by a dull bong! The rogue's eyes rolled up into his head as he blacked out. Like a puppet whose strings have just been cut, the man collapsed. His body slumped forward over the hole and, with

nothing to support it, plummeted into the darkness below.

The deformed features of his face taking on an expression of grim purpose, Otto took the bell-rope that hung from the bell's flywheel and began to pull on it rhythmically and solemnly. The cracked bell began to ring, discordant peals tolling out over the sleeping town. Exactly as he did after every death in Nagenhof: as he did for every funeral.

It would not be long now before others came to him, creatures as deformed and twisted in the eyes of men as he was. Fellows who would welcome him into their pack and hail him as a hero for what he was about to do. There was no going back now. The summoning had begun.



COME ON, Dietrich,' the raven-haired Kislevite was saying. 'It'll be just like old times.'

The innkeeper pulled the pewter tankard he was polishing off the end of the metal hook that stood in place of his right hand and waved it in front of the mercenary. 'With this? I don't think so. It's because of this that I got out of the soldiering game.'

'Ah, come on now,' the mercenary responded. 'I'll wager you're as good with that as you ever were with a sword.'

'Well...' Dietrich considered, admiring the hook as if it were a finely honed Kislevite sabre rather than a replacement for his lost hand.

'And by the looks of you, you haven't gone to fat over the last ten years running this place, so I expect an old warrior like you has kept himself fit by training in the yard out back.' The Kislevite paused to stroke his neatly trimmed black beard and grinned. 'I've seen the notches in that old bear-baiting post. If they weren't made by a sword blade then I'm Baba Yaga's grandmother! Am I right or am I right?'

'I have to do something to while away the lonely hours before opening time,' Dietrich admitted with a laugh and

picked up another tankard that needed polishing.

'We need you, Dietrich, now old Alexi's gone and Krakov's left us. And let's face it, if you're stuck out here in this backwater mooning over serving wenches then you need us too!' At that moment a buxom, sprightly young woman brushed past Torben with a tray of empty tankards and gave him a flirtatious smile. 'Mind you, I wouldn't mind mooning over a few of these wenches myself... but that's beside the point. You think about it for a minute or two and then let me know your decision.' And with that the tall mercenary strode somewhat unsteadily back across the bar to join his equally hard-bitten-looking companions seated around a table on the other side of the room.

Absent-mindedly rubbing the surface layer of the tankard, as if trying to remove the pewter itself, Dietrich Hassner considered the bear-cloaked mercenary band noisily enjoying their evening's ale. He knew Torben Badenov from his soldiering days and a more boastful, hard-drinking, gambler, accomplished swordsman and incorrigible womaniser Dietrich had yet to meet, and he had served in some of the roughest armies ever mustered in all the Empire. He knew Torben's weaselly companion Oran Scarfen from his days of active duty as well, and had lost a fair few wagers to the devious man's swindling sleight-of-hand.

The last he recognised was the young mop-haired Yuri Gorsk, although he knew how much the youth hated being reminded of the fact that he had been the youngest in their regiment. Of course that was years ago now, but the tag seemed to have stuck, maybe because of Yuri's petulant nature and lack of confidence. He needed the support and leadership of Torben and the others to convince him that he was as able as the others. He always had, although he was perfectly capable of handling himself on the battlefield.

Dietrich had known Alexi of Nuln as well, of course. The old soldier had been serving in the armies of the Empire before Dietrich was out of swaddling clothes, but now he was gone, slaughtered by a Chaos-thing, Torben had said, although on that subject

even the normally ebullient mercenary captain had been unusually reticent.

The other two he'd met for the first time when Torben strode into the Hand of Glory that very afternoon, Dietrich having not seen the Kislevite for over a decade. The bear-like giant called Stanislav Hagar was reputed to have the strength of an ox and Dietrich could well believe it after the handshake he received on being introduced to the smiling, erstwhile trapper. The second was a sullen individual dressed in the garb of a nobleman soldier and carrying an old, as well as valuable-looking, blade, scabbarded at his waist. When just Dietrich and Torben had been talking, the latter had told him that the sombre young man was Pieter Valburg, only son of the mayor of Schwertdorf, who had given up everything to avenge the death of his sweetheart at the hands of some degenerate count of Stirland. The nobleman was sitting apart from the rest of Badenov's band at a stall of his own, hunched over something that he appeared to be reading.

They had enjoyed many good times together, he, Torben and the rest, back when they were foot soldiers in the Tzar's army, as well as many terrifying ones, and he was sure that they would again if he were to join Badenov's band. Torben could be very persuasive – Dietrich was reminded of that hilarious night in Talabheim – and to say he wasn't tempted would be a lie. But something in him now yearned for the peaceful existence he had as innkeeper of the Hand of Glory in Nagenhof.

Drawing a tankard of Wergig's Old Peculiar from a barrel behind the bar Dietrich walked over to Torben's table. He pulling up a stole and sat down amid raucous cheers from the inebriated mercenaries.

'You see, Torben, old friend,' he began, 'it's like this...'



JN THE SILENT stillness of the church of Morr the snip of the hand-shears hung in the cold night air of the nave as the black-cowled priest went about the business of trimming the candles. Another candelabra seen to, the white-haired, stooping Father Ludwik shuffled on to the next.

Hearing a pattering on the flagstoned floor behind him the old man looked round to see a large, black rat scamper across the central aisle of the nave and disappear between the battered oak pews. Father Ludwik cursed in a most unpriestly manner and then made the holy sign of Morr in obeisance. There hadn't even been any rats in the crypt, let alone the church, when he had left to tend to the dying Farmer Hackett in the out-lying hamlet of Weiler four days ago.

How could the boy let things get so out of hand in such a short time? Ludwik had returned that afternoon to find none of the candle-wicks trimmed, leaves blown in by the storm piled in drifts around the pews, rather than disposed of, and no sign of Otto.

It was Otto's job to keep the rats down; it never pleased the bereaved to see that the recently departed had been given the once over by vermin.

He obviously needed to teach the boy a lesson and his lessons were never learnt better than when they were accompanied by a good beating.

'Beat the evil out of you,' the old man used to say, when he wasn't so old and his birching arm wasn't so frail.

The priest was roused from his musings by the scratching of claws on the tiles of the chancel. 'When I find that hunchbacked scoundrel...' he muttered to himself. Putting down the hand-shears, and picking up his lamp, he hurriedly made his way towards the darkened sanctuary, his sandals flapping on the cold flagstones. Despite himself, Father Ludwik was intrigued. He had never seen such a large rat in all his life: lithe and black, more like a dog than a rat really. If there were ones that big roaming the building maybe the church of Morr had a bigger rat problem than he had at first thought, and all thanks to Otto's negligence.

Would that boy never learn? Ludwik would have thought that the half-deaf hunchback would have been grateful for all he'd done for him and repay the priest's kindness rather than let the place go to the rats. Especially because... Ludwik halted that particular train of thought.

He could have let the hunchback die like his gypsy-whore of a mother. Morr had seen fit that the witch passed on into his dark domain and perhaps he had planned that her deformed offspring should go with her. But Ludwik had decided to intervene. Had it been out of pity for the mewling infant? Had it been out of a sense of moral obligation? Or was it simply because...

No, that wasn't why! Morr had wanted the child brought up in his service. Why else would the witch have come to the church that night, all those years ago, if not because Morr had guided her there? It was Morr who had directed him to open the door and let her in. And as the gypsy girl – she really had been no more than a girl – lay bleeding to death in the priest's own cot it was Morr, his master, who had made him take the child in his arms. But still sometimes he wondered why.

The boy and his deformity were a penance that the old priest simply had to bear, a daily reminder of past sins. How long would it be before Morr saw fit that they should be absolved?

Father Ludwik stirred from his musings to find that he had followed the rat to the door to the crypt. The creature squeezed its long, bristly body under the door, its worm-like tail disappearing in a trice. Placing a hand on the door's handle he paused, realising that his heart was pounding. What was he afraid of? Was it because he had been reminiscing about the past? Was it because there had been no sign of Otto since he had returned from Weiler? What did he really expect to find in the crypt? Turning the handle Father Ludwik pushed the door open.

Whatever he had expected to see there it certainly wasn't this! The crypt had gained two occupants since he had left to tend to Farmer Hackett. The bodies of two men – or at least what was left of them – lay dumped on the stone preparation table.

Climbing over the corpses, nuzzling their bloodstained whiskers into the soft parts of the cadavers or gnawing at exposed bones, were dozens upon dozens of disgusting, scabrous vermin.

The rats filled the chamber and a few screeched as the lamplight shone in their eyes. In the flickering illumination Ludwik could see that it was unlikely the two men had met their deaths naturally: his training in the ways of Morr had furnished him with an almost macabre knowledge of pathology and human anatomy. One, what was left of his features displaying a swarthy complexion, appeared to have been crudely gutted, judging by the cut to his belly, although the rats had made short work of his intestines so it was hard to be sure. Over this cadaver had been deposited the body of a taller, long-limbed man. His neck and left leg were twisted at unnatural angles suggesting that he had died in a fall. But what horrified Ludwik more than the arrival of the bodies was what was what had been taken away from the crypt.

At that instant the church bell started to toll and the rats began squeaking in raucous excitement. This wasn't the clear reassuring chime of Morr's bell, informing the townsfolk that one of their number was making their way to the underworld. This sound was more like a cold clang, rife with discordant harmonics that set Ludwik's teeth on edge, as if the bell were cracked. The ominous tolling chilled Ludwik to the bone, as if it were his own death-knell. Then he remembered. Three nights ago – the night of the storm – he had heard the distant discordant pealing and that night Hackett had slipped into a coma from which he never recovered. At the time Ludwik had no idea that the sound he had heard had come from the bell-tower of his own church but he did know he hadn't slept well that night.

Otto! he thought and hustled out of the crypt towards the other end of the church.

With one hand on the banister of the creaking wooden staircase, Ludwik began to climb the bell-tower. It had been a long time since the old priest had made the ascent; he left it to the boy these days. After all that was one of the hunchback's jobs

about the place, that and the fact that the tower was a hundred feet tall. The higher Ludwik climbed the more his aching, ageing joints protested. He stopped to catch his breath halfway up the tower. He had to reach the belfry and command Otto to stop. Then the hunchback could expect the beating of his life. No matter how frail Ludwik might be now, righteous fury would lend him the strength to chastise Otto and teach him the folly of his ways.

With every step his lungs heaved, his heart strained against his ribcage. The closer he came to the top of the tower and the tolling bell, a tightening nausea gripped his stomach. At last, puffing and panting, Father Ludwik stepped onto the wooden floor of the belfry. Opposite him, pulling down on the bell-rope with the rhythm of a failing heartbeat was the hunchback.

'Otto!' the priest gasped. 'What are you doing?'

Then Ludwik's eyes fell on the bell itself. It was as he had feared. In the gloom of the belfry he could still make out the cracked, bronze bell suspended from the oak frame. With each pull of the rope, the clapper rung the hideous artefact and it seemed to Ludwik that the claw-like scratches that formed the runes on its surface glowed with a faint green luminescence.

'Ah, father,' Otto slobbered, his malformed vocal chords distorting the words, 'you're back.'

'Yes, I'm back,' snarled Ludwik, 'and I want to know what's going on!'

Something resembling a smile twisted the hunchback's lips. 'I've been busy since you went away, father!' The bell-ringer almost spat the last word.

'You certainly have, you demented oaf!' the priest shouted over the tolling of the bell. 'Can you explain to me why this accursed thing's hanging here and why there are two dead bodies in the crypt?'

'This is the church of Morr,' Otto retorted.

'Why you impudent wretch!' Ludwik roared, raising his arm as if to strike the hunchback. It was all that was needed to send the maniac bell-ringer over the edge.

Otto loped over to the priest and with a backhanded swipe sent the old man flying across the belfry. Ludwik crashed to the floor in a corner, cracking his head on the stone wall.

'I've been doing a lot of thinking lately,' Otto said as the bell continued to swing unaided behind him. 'About why you took me in.'

'I've told you before,' Ludwik said in angry shock, rubbing the back of his head. 'You were a foundling. Your mother was a gypsy. She died giving birth to you, in this very church. It was Morr's will that I take you in.'

'And why did my mother come here, to the temple of the god of death?' The hunchback was getting closer and closer. 'Why didn't she go to the priestesses of Shallya, in her time of need? Why come to a church of Morr and its lone priest, unused to the ways of women and healing? Why, unless she blamed you?'

Ludwik felt his blood run cold. How could the boy know? Who could have told him? Only Ludwik and the boy's mother knew the truth, and she was dead and he hadn't told anyone.

'I've called you father all these years and I never knew,' Otto said, tears born of rage, pain and a deep sadness running down his face.

Suddenly Ludwik found that he couldn't keep it a secret any longer – there was no point – and the words poured out of him in a torrent: 'She tempted me. She was a follower of the Ruinous Powers. She was a gypsy! She used her dark powers to seduce me.'

'My mother was a follower of Chaos? Really?'

'Well look at yourself! She must have been to produce such deformed offspring as you!'

'More lies! More excuses!' the hunchback cried in misery and frustration. 'If my deformity is a reflection of a parent's black heart then it's yours, old man!' Otto was standing over him now and to his horror Ludwik realised that he was shaking.

'You never really wanted me!' Otto howled. 'I was just an unpleasant reminder of your moment of weakness! All the beatings, all the abuse I suffered at your hands. You said it was to educate me! Well you're about to reap what you've sown!'

There was no way for Ludwik to escape. Grabbing the priest's habit, the hunchback lifted him up in his arms and carried him with purposeful steps towards the arched window of the belfry.

'It wasn't really me you were punishing every time you brought the birch down across my twisted spine. You were punishing yourself for siring me!' Ludwik found he had no words as Otto raised him above his head before the arched opening. 'Well I don't need you anymore. There are others coming who will understand me, welcome me into their family, like you never did. Goodbye, father.'

There was a sudden heave and then only air beneath the old priest's body. As he spiralled down towards the ground, the wind rushing in his ears, Father Ludwik could see Otto, the hunchback's ugly face now an expressionless mask, watching him fall. And above him, spread wide over the pinnacle of the bell-tower, the black wings of Morr's great raven unfurled across the night sky.



HHAT'S THAT infernal noise?" Oran Scarfen asked grumpily as the harsh knelling of the church bell continued.

'It's starting to grate on my nerves,' said Yuri Gorsk, looking to the mercenary band's leader for guidance.

'What time is it?' Torben Badenov asked their host.

'It's not yet the hour of ten,' Dietrich said looking at the peeling face of the clock above the blazing fireplace.

'Then what's your bell-ringer playing at?' Oran went on. 'Is he mad?'

'Quite possibly,' said Pieter Valburg darkly, joining his companions at their table. 'That sounds like no ordinary bell.'

'You're telling me,' Dietrich said. 'The church of Morr's only got a small bell. That tolling sounds like it's coming from something much larger.' The innkeeper suddenly froze as a terrible possibility made itself plain to him. 'Oh it couldn't be,' he uttered in a hushed whisper.

'What?' Torben demanded suddenly sober and serious.

'Well, it's just that ten years ago, during the Battle of Nagenhof, the skaven used a war machine we nicknamed the Screaming Bell against the town. I remember watching from the gate defences as giant rats hauled it into position. A monstrous contraption it was, a gigantic bell suspended from a frame bearing all manner of other bells, carried on a great-wheeled carriage. When the Screaming Bell was struck the town walls shook and men's ears bled.'

'I've read of such things,' Pieter said, cryptically.

'When I was fighting in Liotta's Legion in Tilea, at the Liberation of Sileno, around the campfires the talk was rife with tales of the skaven war machines,' Torben added.

'Well after the battle, when the day was won, the war machine was destroyed but one of the smaller bells from the carriage was saved and put in the church crypt, as a reminder of the town's victory over the ratmen.'

'And you think that same bell is the one we can now hear being rung,' Pieter deduced.

'Exactly. Thinking about it, the bell also rang during the storm three nights ago. It sounded a little strange then, only you couldn't be sure over the noise of the thunder, the wind and the rain.'

'But why would anyone want to ring a skaven bell? Who knows what effect it might have?' reasoned the anxious Yuri.

'Well we're not going to find out sitting around here,' the massive Stanislav said, slamming his drained tankard down hard on the table.

'He's right,' Torben said, rising from his seat.

Their curiosity piqued, the rest of Badenov's band followed suit and, accompanied by Dietrich, walked out of the Hand of Glory into the moonlit street. Other inhabitants of the town had also come out of their houses, men, women and children, some dressed for bed, all gazing towards the brooding church at the end of the street.

'Will you look at that?' Oran said alerting the mercenaries to what was happening at their feet.

'Relatives of yours, Oran?' Torben asked as he watched the rats emerging from the inn behind them. The rodent-faced mercenary scowled. 'Looks like you've got a bit of a rat problem,' Torben said, turning to Dietrich.

'Again!' the innkeeper added, skewering one of the vile rodents on the end of his hook as it tried to scamper between his legs.

'They're all over the place!' Yuri stated in a tone of morbid fascination.

It seemed that every cellar and drain in Nagenhof was spewing forth its verminous inhabitants. No matter where they emerged from, all the rats were heading in the direction of the church and the source of the infernal tolling. The mercenaries watched incredulously, as the rats swarmed unhindered towards the tower. The bell continued to ring.

'If it's calling the rats to the church, imagine what else it could be summoning to the town,' Pieter stated coldly.

'Who'd do such a thing?' Torben asked Dietrich.

'Well there are only two of them in the church: Father Ludwik, the priest, and the hunchback.'

'Hunchback?' Pieter asked, animatedly.

'Yes. Otto, the bell-ringer,' Dietrich explained. 'Only people don't normally see too much of him. Ugly as an orc, that one, and as twisted of form as any Chaos spawn.'

'Really? A mutant...' Pieter mused, gazing towards the church and the black finger of its bell-tower.

'Well, it looks like it's up to us to get to the bottom of this,' Torben said with a rueful grin, as he watched the increasingly

agitated townsfolk retreating to the safety of their homes, as the plague of rats grew with no sign of abating.

The excited rush of adrenaline racing through his veins, Torben Badenov led his men at a run towards the church. Dietrich disappeared into the Hand of Glory behind them, only to return moments later with his trusty sword gripped in his left hand.

Just like old times, Torben thought and smiled.



THEY HAD COME in their ones and twos at first, emerging from refuse piles, crawling from hidden nests, and squeezing under cellar doors. Then by the dozen, scampering from the drains and sewers of the old town. At first only a stream of bristling, black bodies wound towards the church of Morr. Then the stream became a torrent of chittering rodents. Cats hissed and dogs barked but all moved out of the way of the growing swarm.

Soon the ever-increasing crush of bodies was like a tide surging through the streets, a seething mass of hairy bodies, naked pink tails, malevolently glinting jaundiced eyes and biting incisors. Some were brown-furred creatures grown fat on the contents of the town's grain stores. Others were sleek and black, their fur wet and spiked from swimming in the sewer channels. Here and there monsters moved among the pack, snarling and snapping at the smaller animals.

But whatever their shape, size or standing within the swarm, all of them moved with a singularity of purpose, worming their way towards the looming church, drawn by the discordant, yet hypnotic, infernal tolling of the great bronze bell.



BENEATH THE streets of Nagenhof the sewers wound like some hideously proportioned worm, linking every home, shop, tavern and municipal building with every other. From here an enemy could attack the town from practically any point, or even every point, effectively besieging Nagenhof from underneath. It was rumoured that the old sewer network even connected with some of the catacombs under the church of Morr, constructed long ago by the first people who settled here. Over time, through subsidence and a slapdash attitude to public health, brickwork had collapsed, tunnel floors had caved in and the tunnels had been joined together into an extensive warren of effluent channels and charnel-tunnels. It had only been a matter of time before the industrious and ever-burrowing skaven had found a way in.

The town watch had long ago been relieved of sewer duty – scouring the labyrinthine tunnels under the town for sight, sound or spoor of the skaven. The mayor and councillors of Nagenhof had become contented and complacent, growing fat on the profits of sheep-rearing and arable farming. It had taken them only ten years to forget how easily the ratmen had almost brought the town to its knees once before. Three generations had been more than enough time for the skaven to retreat to their warrens, breed and increase their numbers, ready to try again.

Warm furry bodies surging past him, as the ratmen of Clan Moulder urged their beasts forwards with spiked whips, Nikkit Skar's upper lip curled back and the packmaster smiled. His hastily organised plan was coming to fruition. Only a matter of days before the keen ears of Clan Moulder's spies had heard the deathly tolling of the bell as it rolled over the desolate moorland south-east of the town of Ostermark, the shuddering peals even reverberating through the earth into the skaven tunnels. The spies had informed their masters at the breeding burrows of Warpnest and an expeditionary force had been quickly mustered to retrieve the bell and assess the strength of the man-things' defences.

The skaven scratched distractedly at its ear and its claws found a tick nestled among the bristles, grown fat on Nikkit Skar's warpstone-infused blood. The skaven pulled the parasite's mashing mandibles free of his skin and popped it into his mouth. The tick burst with a satisfying pop as he pressed it against the roof of his mouth with his tongue and he chewed slowly on its fleshy remains.

Behind the mass of rats still swarming around the sewer Skar was aware of another looming, shadowy presence. Almost three times as tall as the tallest clanrat warrior, its barrel chest so broad that it could barely fit within the confines of the brick tunnel, the beast snorted impatiently. As the way before it gradually cleared the monster knuckled forward, its long arms of corded muscle dragging through the effluent stream of the sewer.

The obsequious Killeye fixed the packmaster with his one glowing red eye – the other a scarred milky orb – and snickered.

'Skullcruncher wants to kill-kill. Hungers to taste flesh of man-things.'

The packmaster considered his snivelling underling and swallowed the last of the tick.

'Time it is, yes, yes,' Skar agreed. 'Lead Skullcruncher to the man-things' corpse-nest.' The skaven's lip curled back still further, 'Then the bell with be ours, ours!'



TORBEN SKIDDED to a halt in front of the gaping portal of the church. The old priest's broken body, his black robes spread out around him like a death-shroud, lay on the ground at the foot of the bell-tower. The dead man's glazed eyes stared up at the heavens, a rictus of horror forever inscribed upon his features.

The ghastly pealing echoed from the walls of the buildings that lined the square in which the church of Morr stood, every knell jarring the teeth in Torben's head. He was having to make a conscious effort to keep his gorge from rising.

'I guess that narrows down our suspects to one,' Torben said to the others who had assembled around him. From their expressions of discomfort it looked as if the bell was having a malign influence on all of them. The broad, open doorway of the church, with its heavy lintel-stone, seemed to beckon the mercenaries into the darkened building.

'Has anyone got a lantern?' Torben asked and a lantern was produced. Once it was lit the mercenary captain advanced through the pillared portal of Morr's temple. His booted footsteps rang from the flagstones of the nave. He paused and glanced back over his shoulder to make sure that he wasn't alone. The rest of his party were congregated around the open doorway apart from Dietrich who had followed him into the along the central aisle.

Holding the lantern high above his head Torben looked towards the apse of the church. A thousand pair of jaundiced eyes reflected the yellow light of his lantern back at him. There were rats everywhere, clambering over the pews, gnawing on black drapes, eating the wax of the candles and defecating on the altar cloth. The reek of the rodents' urine and faeces made him grimace.

Torben could almost believe that the rats were defiling Morr's temple in order to rededicate it to another, altogether less human, deity. A hollow booming resonated around the columns and walls of the church and Torben swallowed hard as he tasted bile in the back of his mouth.

'Right, this is what we're going to do,' he said to the malingering mercenaries. 'We need to—Pieter! Where are you going?'

The young nobleman halted in his ascent of the staircase off the end of the nave that led to the belfry above them. 'To stop the source of the problem!'

'But we need to deal with the rats here!'

'We need to stop the bell ringing!' Pieter argued.

'Look, who's the leader of this outfit?' Torben shouted angrily above the discordant tolling.

Pieter said nothing and resumed his ascent of the tower.

'By Boris Ursa's beard!' Torben cursed, striding back towards his companions.

'Look, old friend!' Dietrich called to Torben, pointing to somewhere behind the mercenary captain.

Looking back, his eyes straining as he peered into the shadows at the far end of the church, Torben could see crouching, heavily built humanoid figures creeping through the gloom, their pointed snouts belying their heritage. 'Skaven!' he hissed under his breath. The creatures were entering the church through an iron-studded door, which he took to be the way to the crypt. He guessed that some of the older crypts joined up with the town's sewers or hidden skaven tunnels from the time when Nagenhof was besieged by the ratmen ten years ago. There was no time to lose: they would have to go with his original plan. Abandoning any pretensions of stealth Torben rapidly rejoined the others.

'We need to trap them in here,' the raven-haired Kislevite told the mercenaries. 'If the skaven leave the church the good people of Nagenhof could find themselves with the kind of vermin infestation rat-catchers only dream about! If we can defeat them while they're contained we'll probably be able to repel the assault outright. From my experiences in Tilea, if the ratmen think the odds are stacked against them they'll turn tail and run.'

'What do you want us to do?' Stanislav asked.

'You, Oran and Yuri get out and stay out,' Torben ordered. 'Barricade us in and set fire to the temple. Use whatever you can to get a good blaze going.'

'Are you insane?' Oran blurted out. 'Trap you in here with them and then set fire to a temple of Morr?'

Torben flashed his weaselly friend a toothy grin. 'Since when has a little arson troubled your conscience? Dietrich and I will make sure the skaven don't break out before the fire gets going. Are you with me old friend?' he said, turning to the hook-handed old soldier.

'You need to ask?' came Dietrich's curt reply. 'I helped stop these vermin from overrunning Nagenhof ten years ago and I'll stop them again!'

'How will you get out?' Yuri demanded.

'Oh, I'm sure I'll think of something,' Torben joked, trying to make light of the situation. 'I usually do.'

'Come on, lad,' Stanislav said, guiding the younger man towards the door with a ham-sized hand. 'He knows what he's doing.'

As Torben unsheathed his sword and Dietrich uttered a hasty prayer to whatever god might be listening, for the first time in a long time the doors to the church of Morr slammed shut. Then, in a squeaking frenzy, the rats were upon them.



OOME ON, you slovenly curs!' Oran was shouting. 'Anybody'd think you didn't want to save your stinking town!'

The small crowd of townspeople, who had found the courage to follow the mercenaries towards the church backed away from the ranting, gap-toothed weasel of a man muttering to each other in disapproval.

'You're mad!' someone shouted from the back of the crowd. 'You expect us to help you burn down the church?'

'Mad am I? Come here and say that,' Oran said, dagger in hand and fury blazing in his eyes. 'You ungrateful bastards! We should leave you to the rats!'

'I don't think this approach is working,' Stanislav said calmly, putting a strong hand on his wiry companion's shoulder. 'Yuri, do you want to try?'

The younger mercenary looked at the gentle giant uncomfortably from under his straggly fringe and took a step back, 'No, no. They wouldn't listen to me.' Yuri shuffled from one foot to the other looking at the ground. 'You try, Stanislav. You're better at that sort of thing than me. Your words will carry more weight with them than mine.'

'Very well,' said the big, bearded man and took a step towards the townspeople with his arms outstretched in a gesture of

openness. 'Friends, the truth is we need your help. As we speak Dietrich and our companions are trapped inside the church holding off a dire threat to the safety of your town. How many of you share a drink and a friendly word with Dietrich at the Hand of Glory on a regular basis?' A couple of cautious hands went up among the crowd. 'And how many of you were born here and grew up here?' Several more hands went up. 'Dietrich's been here a fair few years less than you, yet he considers Nagenhof his home and he's prepared to fight to the death to protect it.'

Stanislav paused. The people were discussing the situation anew amongst themselves.

'Go on,' said a grimy-faced man wearing a blacksmith's apron.

'Well if this place means so much to a retired soldier who's only lived here for the last decade think how much it should mean to you whose grandfathers grew up here, you whose families owe their livelihoods to this town. You whose children will inherit the legacy of this night, whatever the outcome may be.'

There were nods of agreement at the truth of Stanislav's words.

'I'm sure there isn't a single one of you here who doesn't remember the events of ten years ago or who hasn't heard the stories of what happened the last time the ratmen attacked this town,' he went on. 'I'll wager there wasn't a single person here whose life wasn't affected by the events of that dark time, not one family who didn't lose a loved one to the skaven assault.'

The crowd's agreement was becoming more vocal now.

'They fought and died for their homes, so are you now going to let their sacrifice come to nought by letting the rats take Nagenhof now, when we still have the advantage?'

'No!' came the cry from a chorus of voices.

'Then help us now and save your town!' Stanislav urged and a cheer went up from the crowd. The gentle giant allowed himself a smile. Where Oran's abrasive manner had found only resistance and

recalcitrance, Stanislav's encouraging words had resulted in enthusiastic compliance.

'Right, that's more like it!' Oran scowled, challenging the townsfolk once more. 'We need faggots of wood, pitch... anything that'll burn. And hurry up about it, you spineless sons of bitches!'

Stanislav looked to the retiring Yuri and raised his eyebrows in exasperation as Oran chided the people of Nagenhof into reluctant action.



PETER STEPPED onto the belfry floor and looked up at the skaven bell in horrified wonder. The tolling had sounded loud enough to shake the mortar from the stones of the church, as Pieter had ascended the tower, but in the belfry the cacophonous booming made it feel as if his eardrums would burst at any moment. As the cracked, bronze bell swung slowly to and fro, with each strike of the clapper the feral runes etched around the rim pulsed with a sick green light. Without a doubt there was evil magic at work here.

Too late he realised something was wrong – there was no one pulling on the bell-rope, the bell was swinging under its own momentum. The belfry appeared to be deserted. Before he could turn his head fully to look behind him there was a blur of movement at the periphery of his vision and something hard and heavy connected with the back of his skull, knocking him unconscious instantly.



TORBEN'S HEAVY Kislevite sabre dropped down across the back of the leaping rat, slicing the wolfhound-sized creature cleanly in two. As the monster fell to the flagstoned floor, its guts spilling around the mercenary's feet, another beast came at him with

snapping jaws. A deft twist of his wrist drove the tip of his descending blade into the rat's mouth, skewering the creature on the end.

Dietrich was only an arm's length away, batting rats aside with the flat of his sword-blade whilst jabbing at the swarm of vermin with his hook. The two of them were almost surrounded. Behind the snarling, squeaking pack the leather-armoured skaven still hung back, goading their beasts to attack the two defenders.

As Torben fought on, trying to avoid being bitten by the disease-carrying teeth of the rats, he was reminded of the night in the isolated windmill on the Ostermark Marches when Badenov's band had battled the children of the god of pestilence. He was sure that if even one of the rats managed to bite him his fate would ultimately be the same as if a nurgling sank its filthy fangs into him – a slow, agonising death from the plague – and that was no way for a warrior to die!

Desperation lending strength to his sword-arm Torben struck out at the slavering rat-pack again and again and again.



WHOOMPH! The pitch-soaked faggots piled against the doors of the church burst into flame as Oran rammed the blazing torch among the sticks. The fire spread quickly, following the path of oil poured around the base of the building, igniting the kindling and licking up the tar-drenched walls. The grim expressions of the townsfolk and the mercenaries were picked out in flickering detail by the orange flames as all watched the church of Morr begin to burn in stupefied silence. All except one.

'I hope you know what you're doing, Torben,' Oran muttered under his breath.



JT SEEMED TO Dietrich that they had been holding the rat-swarm at bay for an hour, gaining no ground whatsoever but conceding none either, although in reality it had been less than a quarter of that time. A sharp upswing with the hook strapped to his right arm resulted in the disembowelment of another of the vermin. Torben was hacking at the seething mass of rats with an expression of avenging fury on his face, doing all he could to stop the verminous horde getting past him and out of the church. And all the while the bell continued to toll, drawing yet more servants of the skaven to the church.

Dietrich became aware of a chittering voice, halfway between human speech and the squeaking of rats. It was as if the skaven were discussing alternative plans. Then he saw it.

Behind the skaven, at the back of the church, a huge shape detached itself from the shadows and moved towards Torben and himself with ungainly strides. Before the monstrous creature even moved within range of the guttering light from Torben's discarded lantern the soldier recognised the creature for what it was. The massive, distorted physique, the over-long talons, the muscles like ships' cables, the inflamed boils covering its hairy hide, the spikes protruding from the malformed vertebrae of its spine, the huge rodent head, the brands burnt into its flesh, the scar running from one shoulder down across its breastbone – the scar he had given it in return for the hand the beast had taken from him! The day he had fought the rat-ogre on the very threshold of the north gate, the day the slavering beast had bitten off his right hand and he had delivered it what he had thought had been a fatal wound. On that day the monster's warped visage had become etched upon his memory.

Despite the fact that the two fighters were only just holding their position against the verminous vanguard, the impatient ratmen had obviously decided that the humans' stand was delaying them too long inside the church, allowing the people of Nagenhof to muster a stronger defence against the invaders. So now they

found themselves facing the unbridled ferocity of a rat-ogre.

Dietrich quickly assessed the situation. As long as the bell kept tolling the rats' onslaught would continue unabated. The two men would soon tire and one of the biting, clawing plague ridden vermin would find a way through their defence. Once one was through they were doomed.

'Torben!' he called out. 'We have to stop that bell ringing!'

'Pieter's dealing with it!' the mercenary captain replied, cutting down a two-headed monstrosity.

'That was a while ago now,' Dietrich pointed out, 'and I can still hear the bell!'

Torben trapped the squirming body of a giant rat under his boot and ran it through with his sword. 'You're right,' he puffed. 'Let's go.'

Kicking aside a scrabbling rodent Torben leapt over the rat swarm, heading for the stairs. Following his friend's lead Dietrich ran across the nave, crushing a number of skulls under his feet.

The skaven were squeaking furiously. At first Dietrich thought it was because they were escaping but as he reached the first landing on the staircase he saw wisps of smoke drifting under the barricaded church doors. The skaven's sensitive nostrils had picked up the smell of smoke before Dietrich was aware of it. But now he could see it billowing in thick grey clouds under the doors, obscuring his view of the skittering rats.

At a shouted command from one of the skaven the rat-ogre stomped eagerly towards the foot of the bell-tower, its massive, muscular torso visible above the rising smoke. The soldier was horrified at how quickly so large a creature could move!

'Torben! Hurry up!' Dietrich shouted. The mercenary, who was already taking the stairs two at a time, increased his stride to three.

Dietrich felt the wooden steps judder as the beast leapt onto staircase. As he raced upwards, he felt the shaking become more vigorous as the rat-ogre bounded after them. Daring a glance round Dietrich saw the club-like arm scything towards his legs

and in an adrenaline-fuelled leap threw himself forwards and upwards. The rat-ogre's claws, as thick, as tough and as sharp as iron spikes, connected with the step Dietrich had just left which splintered like matchwood.

With a groaning crash part of the staircase came free of the wall. Without anything holding it up, the mid-section the rat-ogre was teetering on gave way under the monster's great weight. For a split second Dietrich thought he had escaped the fiendish creature. Then he saw the balustrade linking the last few steps he had to climb to the next landing, and safety, sag. Torben had already reached the haven of the sturdier landing but Dietrich was not so lucky. Joists came free, pinioning pegs were torn from their sockets and rotten timbers crumbled.

Dietrich felt his stomach jump into his mouth as he dropped like a stone, the stairs collapsing beneath him. He fell fifteen feet and landed heavily on the ground, amidst a cloud of dust and wood splinters. Only it wasn't the ground. Although it was hard, whatever he had landed on was pliable, warm and stank of rancid animal musk.



TORBEN FROZE his ascent and looked down. Dietrich lay sprawled on top of the stunned rat-ogre surrounded by the wreckage of the staircase. Through the gloom and the smoke, the mercenary could just make out the shadowy shapes of the skaven hurrying away towards the back of the church, where crimson flickering firelight illuminated their hunched rat bodies through the apse window. The rats swarmed around the base of the bell-tower in panic. The bell tolled ceaselessly.

Torben looked back down at his companion. Dietrich pushed himself up on his hooked hand, a look of bewilderment on his face. 'Dietrich! Are you all right?' the mercenary yelled down to his friend.

Dietrich looked up at him. 'Go!' he yelled. 'Finish what we came here for. There's nothing you can do here!' A rumbling growl came from the prone rat-ogre and its claws clenched. 'I'll hold off this beast here. We're old acquaintances. There will be a reckoning between us this night!'

Dietrich rolled off the mutated monster, readying his sword in his left hand as the beast suddenly sprang to its feet. Torben paused, not wanting to abandon his friend but the trained professional in him told him that he must. The tolling had to be stopped.

'Sigmar guide your sword-arm, my friend!' he called down.

'For Nagenhof!' came Dietrich's reply.

Swearing he would have his vengeance on the vile skaven, Torben resumed his rapid ascent of the stairs. He didn't look back again.



PETER'S VISION swam into focus for a moment and then almost blacked out again as he felt the rough hemp strands of a rope tighten around his neck. His head ached, the noise of the bell reverberated through his skull, but the asphyxiation threatening to overwhelm him, outweighed every other concern. Realising that if he were to save himself he would have to act quickly, Pieter scrabbled at the noose.

'Try to stop me, would you?' came a slurred voice thick with saliva in his ear. 'Well you're too late! They're here!'

Pieter had no doubt who was trying to kill him – the insane hunchback, Otto the bell-ringer, who had summoned the skaven back to the town of Nagenhof. He had to be stopped and he had to be stopped now. As he struggled with the rope at his throat Pieter took in his surroundings. He had been dragged from where he had been coshed at the top of the stairs to the edge of the opening beneath the great, swinging bell.

'You're all the same,' bellowed Otto, 'and you'll all die the same way!'

The hunchback sounded as if he wasn't used to hearing his own voice clearly or his tongue was malformed. He was horribly strong and no matter what Pieter tried, he couldn't lessen the pressure on his windpipe. As his eyes rolled up into the top of his head Pieter's vision was filled with the swinging green-tinged shadow of the bell and a desperate plan formed in his mind.

Pieter pushed himself backwards, rocking onto his back. At the same time he brought his legs up, giving the skaven bell a hefty kick on the upswing. He felt the constricting rope slacken slightly as the hunchback looked up in surprise. Then all pressure was gone as the deformed mutant tried to dodge out of the way of the returning bell.

There was a loud clang followed by a groan of pain and the hunchback stumbled to the floor. Being careful to avoid the still swinging bell, Pieter stood up, rubbing his chafed raw neck with one hand and holding the bell-rope the hunchback had been trying to strangle him with in the other. He looked down at the moaning creature that was getting unsteadily to its feet. Blood ran from the hunchback's smashed mouth. The mutant was as ugly as the dream-conjured Chaos spawn of a flagellant's nightmares. He had read of such blasphemies against nature in the plague-scholar's grimoire. Such hideous deformity was all the proof Pieter needed to believe that the hunchback was a Chaos-warped mutant.

Before the stunned bell-ringer could gather his senses, Pieter covered the distance between them and looped the noose around the hunchback's thick neck. As the dizzily staggering mutant found the tables turned he began to pull at the knotted hemp. Taking a few steps back Pieter charged at his attacker's broad and twisted back. He slammed into the hunchback with his shoulder and kept pushing. Otto stumbled forwards, in his unbalanced state the momentum of the impact carrying him onwards. A clubfoot found the edge of the hole beneath the bell and slipped. As the bell swept past the hunchback tumbled through the opening with a cry – a cry that was suddenly

silenced with a snap as the rope pulled taut and his neck broke.

'I knew you had the situation under control,' came a familiar voice from behind the gasping nobleman. Pieter looked around. Torben stood puffing at the top of the staircase. A loud clang resounded around the belfry, making both men wince. 'Right,' said the mercenary captain, 'let's stop that bell.'



WEATHED IN eye-watering smoke, the soldier and the beast fought. Dietrich staggered backwards as he parried the rat-ogre's blow, his sword sinking into the monster's arm up to the bone. The skaven mutant roared in pain and anger, its rancid breath washing over the soldier and making him gag. Rather than being repelled by the injury the rat-ogre was spurred on by it and pushed its advantage onward. With his sword stuck fast above him, embedded in the beast's flesh, Dietrich found himself being pushed backwards, his midriff undefended. He swept up with his hook as the monster slashed at him with its other claw-like paw. He was too late.

The rat-ogre batted his arm aside. The jarring sensation that lanced up his arm told Dietrich that the beast had almost succeeding in dislocating it at the elbow. But this split second of pain was immediately drowned by a gut-wrenching flood of agony that told Dietrich he was dying.

The rat-ogre paused, blood running from the dozen wounds, steam rising from its heaving flanks. Dietrich slumped to his knees, his intestines uncoiling through the rent in his stomach.

Through the choking smoke he was dimly aware of the rat-ogre roaring in triumph and the furious squeaking of the rats milling around him. The roof too had started to burn, blazing beams crashing to the floor of the nave. But all these sounds began to fade from his awareness as another sound became louder and louder, until it was the only sound he could hear:

the dub-dub of his slowing pulse pounding in his ears. Dub-dub, dub-dub. Dub. Dub...



THE KISLEVITE'S sabre struck the rocking beam cutting through the last coils of rope securing the heavy skaven bell in place. With a final dull bong the bell dropped down the tower, smashing into the hunchback's swinging corpse as it did so and crashing through the staircase as in tilted on its axis.

As the rat-ogre advanced on the fatally wounded Dietrich the bell plummeted inexorably downwards. With a resounding metallic clang, the skaven artefact hit the looming beast, hurling it to the ground and crushing the rat-ogre's skull.

Just like old times, Dietrich thought and died.



WHAT DO WE do now?" Pieter asked the sweating Kislevite, as the church burned beneath them.

Torben thought. What could they do now? Up until this point he had been reacting instinctively to each event as it arose with no forethought. Now they had completed what they had set out to do and they were trapped. There was no way down inside the bell-tower, now that the staircase had been destroyed by the bell and the rat-ogre, and besides, the whole building was ablaze. Parts of the roof had begun to fall in, flames licking up through the holes into the night sky. Smoke was also beginning to rise through the gaps between the planks of the belfry floor as the tower acted like a natural chimney, drawing the fire upwards. There wasn't a suitable rope they could use to climb down the outside of the tower and to jump the one hundred feet would be suicide.

Torben peered over the parapet of the belfry, as if just to confirm his initial assessment. Then over the crackling of the flames he heard something: a distant shouting. Peering through the billowing smoke he saw at first a crowd of townspeople, standing in a semi-circle around the end of the church. Within that semi-circle three figures, illuminated by the conflagration were looking up at him and calling. The biggest was standing next to a full hay-cart, which had been brought as close to the burning building as the mercenaries could manage without it catching alight. 'We jump,' Torben said, and before Pieter could question him he pointed down the side of the tower, adding, 'and try to follow my orders this time!'

Without a moment's hesitation the two men climbed onto the ledge of the opening under the eaves and, flung themselves out into space...

The two of them hit the hay, the wind knocked out of them but otherwise unhurt and Torben, for one, had never been so glad to wind up with a face full of straw. Spiralling embers swirled around them, some landing in the hay. A crackling sound, accompanied by excited cursing from Oran, told Torben that the hay had caught alight.

As Stanislav untied the horse, Torben and Pieter scrambled down from the cart, joining the others at a safer distance from where Badenov's band watched as the church of Morr burned.



BY MID-AFTERNOON the next day the fire had gone out, enabling the mercenaries to explore the burnt-out shell of the church. Picking their way through the mounds of blackened rat-corpse and the smouldering ruins of the roof, that now filled the nave with a forest of charred beams and fused tiles, it did not take them long to find what remained of Dietrich Hassner. Opposite the dead soldier lay the flattened, charred mass of the rat-ogre. Its pulped head was almost

unrecognisable but of the bell that had killed it there was no sign.

'I suppose it could have melted,' Stanislav suggested, prodding the smouldering rubbish at the foot of the tower with his boot. 'That fire was hotter than a forge.'

'It's possible,' Torben considered, 'but somehow I doubt it. I think our furry friends got what they came for in the end.'

He caught Pieter's gaze but the sullen noblemen said nothing.

'Come on,' said Torben. 'We've a burial to perform - with no priest of Morr or temple to perform it in - and the life of a friend to commemorate back at the Hand of Glory.'

As they made their way out of the ruined church, bearing the soldier's body on an improvised stretcher, Torben couldn't help feeling dejected. The usually happy-go-lucky mercenary was beginning to feel that Badenov's band was rather down on its luck as of late, what with the deaths of Alexi and now Dietrich.

Death was their business, he knew, but death seemed to dog their path. It was as if Morr himself or some darker power had mapped out their destinies for them. They hadn't even made enough money to replace the horses Krakov had lost all those months ago and Krakov himself had disappeared.

'The dead and the damned,' he suddenly found himself declaring aloud.

'What?' asked the younger Yuri, walking next to him.

'The dead and the damned,' Torben repeated. 'It seems to me that's all we are. One or the other, dead or damned.'

'What's that?' Oran interjected. 'You're starting to sound like misery-guts over here,' he said indicating Pieter, who was hanging back from the others.

'Dietrich was an old friend. Of course you're upset,' Stanislav said soothingly, as they neared the inn. 'Get some ale inside you and you'll feel like your old self again.'

Torben managed a weak smile. 'So the first round's on you?' he said.

'See? Everything will be fine,' pronounced the usually cynical Oran.

But despite his show of bravado somehow Torben didn't think so. *

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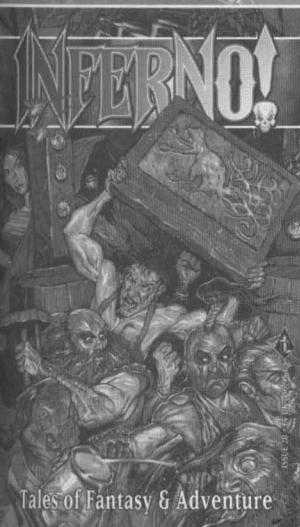
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THE TEN-TAILED CAT
IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN
THROUGHOUT THE CITY
AS A GATHERING PLACE
FOR RACONTEURS AND
THE TELLERS OF TALL
TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

...WHILE SOME JUST COME TO
PEDDLE THEIR WARES.

SO YOU'RE
INTERESTED IN
BUYING MY
PUPPETS
THEN?

POSSIBLY.
TELL ME, HOW DID YOU
COME BY THEM?

JUST TO
SET MY MIND
AT EASE, OF
COURSE.

WELL,
THEREIN LIES A TALE,
MY FRIEND.

TALES FROM THE **TEN-TAILED CAT**

THEY ONCE BELONGED TO **GUIDO PORIFINI**, A MASTER PUPPETEER
FROM THE SOUTHERN LANDS.

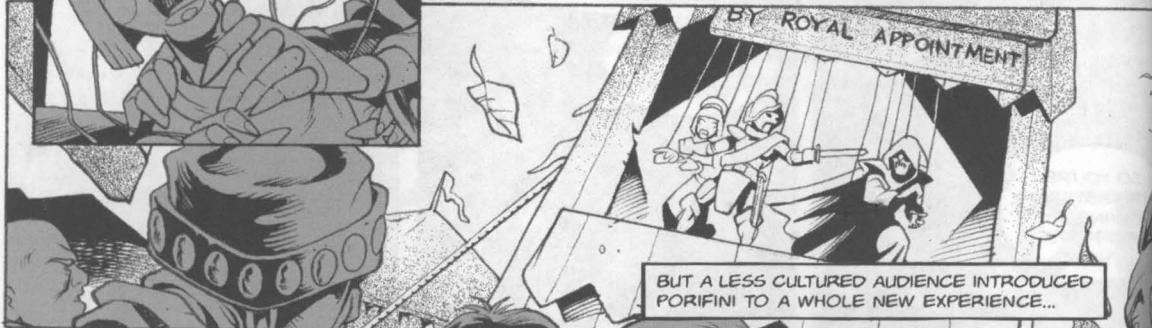
PORIFINI'S PUPPET SHOWS WERE
FABLED THROUGHOUT NORTHERN
ESTALIA AND ENTHRALLED BOTH
ADULT AND CHILD ALIKE.

The
Puppet
Master's
Tale

BY TWO'S
HEAD

THE NOBILITY OF ESTALIA CLAMOURED FOR PRIVATE PERFORMANCES FROM THE GREAT MAN BUT HE HAD TO LEAVE THERE SUDDENLY. SOMETHING TO DO WITH A NOBLEMAN'S DAUGHTER.

TRAVELLING NORTH TO THE EMPIRE, PORIFINI JOINED UP WITH P.D. BARFUNG'S TRAVELLING CARNIVAL.



BUT A LESS CULTURED AUDIENCE INTRODUCED PORIFINI TO A WHOLE NEW EXPERIENCE...



BUT DESPITE THE CRITICISM, PORIFINI WOULD RETURN WITH THE CARNIVAL YEAR AFTER YEAR.

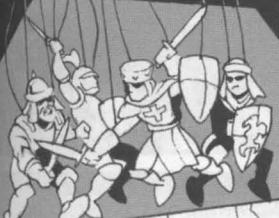


UNLIKE MANY OF HIS CRITICS.

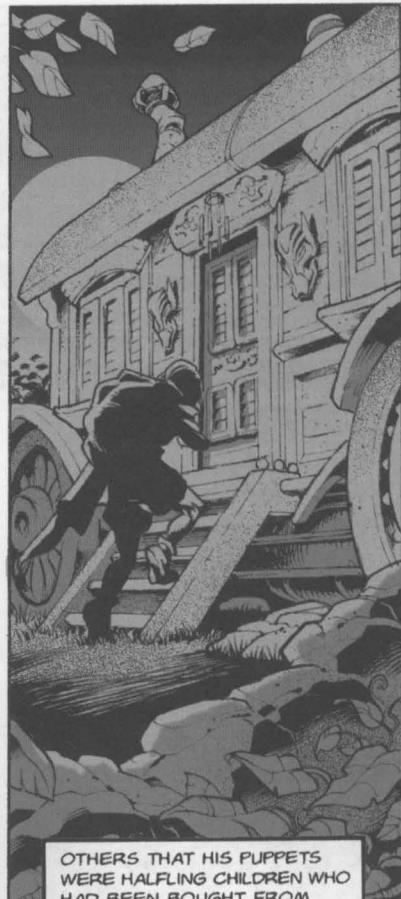


PORIFINI, MASTER PUPPETEER

BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT



RUMOURS ABOUT
THE SOURCE OF HIS
UNDoubted TALENT
RANGED FROM THE
SUBLINE TO THE
RIDICULOUS.



AND AS THE YEARS PASSED,
PORIFINI'S COLLECTION OF PUPPETS
GREW AND HIS SHOWS BECAME
MORE AND MORE SPECTACULAR.

SOME SAID HE WAS A FORMER
MAGE WHO HAD TURNED TO
PUPPETRY TO MAKE ENDS MEET.

OTHERS THAT HIS PUPPETS
WERE HALFLING CHILDREN WHO
HAD BEEN BOUGHT FROM
THEIR IMPoverISHED FAMILIES.



AS FOR THE TRUTH, WELL,
NOBODY WAS ENTIRELY SURE.

WHATEVER IT WAS
SERVED HIM WELL
UNTIL THAT NIGHT
IN STIRLAND.



THE TOWN MAYOR HAD GONE MISSING AND THE TOWNSFOLK SUSPECTED PORIFINI'S **HAND** IN IT.

THE NEXT MORNING ALL THAT WAS FOUND IN THE BURNED OUT REMAINS OF THE MASTER PUPPTEER'S CARAVAN WAS HIS **BAG OF PUPPETS**.

TUTTEFF!
BY ROYAL APP

BUT UNFORTUNATELY
I DID NOT HAVE THE
SKILL THAT PORIFINI DID.

AND WITH CROWDS DWINDLING
THE OWNER RELUCTANTLY
LET ME GO THIS MORNING...

WHEN I ASKED THE CARNIVAL
OWNER IF I COULD TAKE OVER
FROM PORIFINI, HE WAS ONLY
TOO **HAPPY** TO OBLIGE ME.

...ALLOWING ME TO TAKE
THIS BAG OF PUPPETS IN
LIEU OF PAYMENT.

SO, TELL
ME KIND SIR, ARE YOU STILL
INTERESTED IN **TAKING**
**THEM OFF MY
HANDS?**

INDEED I AM.

LET US
RETIRE TO A BACK
ROOM WHERE WE MAY
FINISH OUR BUSINESS
IN PEACE.

25.25
1.75

GOODNIGHT,
GUIDO.

I'M SORRY IF THAT
PEDDLER WAS BOthering YOU
EARLIER. HE'S BEEN TRYING TO
OFFLOAD THAT BAG OF
PUPPETS ALL DAY.

OH,
I WOULDN'T
WORRY...

...I
DOUBT HE'LL BE
BOthering ANYBODY
AGAIN.

THE END



LIBERTY

A KAGE STORY BY GAV THORPE

PRISON GUARD Serpival Lance suppressed a yawn and withdrew into the sentry alcove a little further to get out of the driving wind and dust. The permanent tempest howled around the roof of the tower, all but obscuring the ruddy lights that shone from the edge of the landing pad only a dozen metres away. He had been on duty for three hours and still had three to go, and he glanced enviously at the light shining beneath the door of the guardhouse to his left. Here he was, wrapped up in his heavy weather coat, hood pulled tight around his face, while the others laughed and played cards inside. It wasn't right for a man of his age. He had served the Emperor on this prison planet for thirty years, and still he was stuck out here on Emperor-forsaken nights like this.

His misanthropic musings were interrupted when the internal comm speaker squawked behind him. He pressed the receiver rune and bent his aching back to listen closely.

'He's come back. Due to land in a few minutes,' the guard captain's voice crackled over the comm-set. Serpival grunted an acknowledgement and cast his eye into the cloud-covered skies. It wasn't long before the landing beacon sprung to life, a guiding low energy laser piercing the gloom from the centre of the landing pad. Shortly after, answering lights could be seen glimmering in the darkness as the shuttle descended, the howl of its engines growing clearer and clearer as they drew closer and blotted out the noise of the wind.

With a clang of metal landing feet on the mesh surface of the roof, the shuttle settled, its engines at a roar which kicked up the dust into even more violent swirls

before cutting out. An erratically wobbling entry gantry extended out from the docking area and connected with the shuttle's hatchway. The door opened and banged against the shuttle fuselage and a tall uniformed figure stepped out. The three guards in the tower spilled out and stood to attention by the doorway into the interior. The Imperial Guard officer said something to them and pointed inside the shuttle. The guards saluted and hurried past to emerge a moment later carrying a heavy bundle.

Curious, and knowing that it was a breach of regulations but unable to stop himself, Serpival ducked out of the sentry post and hurried across the rooftop to the others. They were carrying a man, slumped unconscious in their arms, dressed in full combat fatigues and camouflaged in black and dark blues. As they bundled him into the room, his head lolled towards Serpival and the guard suppressed a shudder at the sight of the man's face. It was horrifically scarred, criss-crossed by weals and cuts, bullet grazes and burns.

'The governor has all of the official notification. Lock him up with the rest,' the officer said curtly before turning on his heel and walking back towards the shuttle.

At that moment the new prisoner groaned and came round, shaking his head. The others lowered him to the floor, glancing at the retreating back of the officer. Groggily, the Imperial Guardsman stood up, blinking his eyes to clear them.

'Where the frag?' he asked, still slightly disorientated.

'Ghoul vincularum,' Serpival told him.

'A prison planet?' the man asked for confirmation, his eyes suddenly focussing on Serpival, all dizziness gone, making the guard squirm as if he were looking down the barrel of a lasgun.

'Yes, a prison,' the prison guard repeated himself, nervous under the evil stare of the newcomer.

It was then that the prisoner followed the gaze of the others. The officer was just climbing through the hatchway.

'Come back here, you bastard! Schaeffer, you sump-sucking piece of crap!' the newly arrived inmate screamed, roughly shoving Serpival aside and taking a step out onto the docking gantry. The officer turned, looked once and then slammed the hatch shut without a word. The prisoner broke into a run, yelling incoherently, and the other guards sprinted after him.

It was Shrunk who caught him first, grappling the man's left arm. The prisoner stumbled, recovered his footing and then smashed the extended fingers of his right hand into Shrunk's face, who fell away screaming, clutching at his eyes. Frentz swung a right-handed punch, but the guardsman easily swayed to his left, delivering a short kick to the prison officer's knee that made it snap the wrong way, tumbling him to the ground with shrieks of agony.

The shuttle engines roared back into full life, bathing the rooftop in their white glare, the prisoner silhouetted against them, his fist raised, his words of hatred drowned out by the noise. Serpival and the remaining guard, Jannsen, drew their heavy pistols and took aim at the prisoner, who stood there, fist still raised, watching the departing shuttle.

'Try any more of that and I'll plug you, you vicious scumbag!' Jannsen called out.

The prisoner turned around slowly, his face lit by the lights of the landing pad, bathing his scarred features in a hellish red glow. Slowly the man walked back towards them, and Serpival had to fight to remain calm and his grip on his pistol steady as the stranger slowly strode towards them, murderous intent on his face. He stopped a couple of metres away.

'Just take me to my fraggin' cell before I take that pistol off you,' the man growled, nodding towards the gun in Jannsen's shaking grip.

'The prisoner will lie face down and do as he is told,' Jannsen said, without much confidence.

'Kage,' the prisoner replied, glancing at each of them in turn and then stepping easily between them, looking back over his shoulder at Serpival. 'Call me Kage.'



XIII

I'M STANDING there wishing this repetitive, idiotic man would just shut the hell up. The prison governor is a sour, hatchet-faced man, crouched like a malevolent rodent behind his massive desk. That desk says volumes on its own – three metres wide, two metres deep, an Imperial eagle burnt into the surface but otherwise empty. He sits there behind it, elbows resting on the deep red wood, his chin resting on the knuckles of his clasped hands as he drones on and on and on. Behind him are two guards with shotguns, and I know there are two more behind me, similarly armed. They really don't trust me in here with their commander.

'...Which is why you will adhere by these rules at all times,' Governor Skandlegrist is saying, peering at me over a pair of half-moon glasses. He is dressed in layered robes of black and deep red, strangely matching the desk in colour. 'Punishment for infractions will vary depending on the severity of the offence. I have had special instructions from Colonel Schaeffer to keep an eye on you, Kage, and I will do so. I will be watching you like a hawk, and if you step out of line the full force of my authority here will fall upon you. Be warned, you are under close observation, so don't think you can get away with anything, anything at all.'

'Right, I get the picture,' I butt in desperately, taking a step forward which causes the guards to pull up their shotguns. At least they're paying attention, which is more than I am. 'Can I just get to my cell now?'

'Your disrespect for a commanding officer is shocking, Kage, as is your disregard for the laws and regulations of the Imperial Guard,' Skandlegrist replies. 'You are a bad seed, Kage, and I have no idea why Colonel Schaeffer wants you to be detained at this facility instead of being on the gallows like you should be, no idea at all. But, unlike you, I have my orders and I follow them, and follow them I will, mark my words. Yes, I'll be watching you, Kage, very closely, very closely indeed.'

With a gesture from thin, crabby fingers he orders the guards to escort me out. We're near the top of the tower, maybe just a couple of floors down from the landing pad on the roof. The whole tower is a broad cylinder, with just a single elevator shaft linking all the floors at the circle's centre. We stand there while the lift cranks and rattles up from the depths of the tower, the guards still nervous and agitated.

When the conveyor arrives, one of the guards opens the doors, which squeal on rusting hinges with an ear-grinding shriek. A shotgun butt in my back propels me into the interior of the open ironwork cage, and they follow me in, not standing too close, guns lowered at my belly. One of them pulls the lever, to the eighteenth storey I note, and we start to judder our way down the shaft.

'Shrank was my friend, you piece of filth,' one of the guards hisses in my ear over the sound of grinding gears. 'I'm gonna make you pay for blinding him, one of these days.'

I turn and look at him with a patronising smile.

'You try anything, I'll rip your arm off and shove it down that big mouth of yours,' I tell him, meeting his gaze and causing him to flinch.

'I bet,' he says, recovering well. Before I realise what he's doing, he slams the shotgun in his hands straight into my chin, smacking my head against the iron grillwork of the elevator cage. Another one steps up and puts a boot into my gut, winding me badly, while the first jabs the shotgun into my face again, bruising my right cheek. Another three or four blows rain down on me. I take the brunt of it on my shoulders, before they step back, panting.

I crouch there for a moment before straightening up, feeling my right eye begin to swell and close. I roll my neck with an audible clicking and look at each of them in turn through my good eye. I take a good look at them, memorising the names on the tags on their uniforms.

'I'm gonna kill all of you meatheads, and I'm gonna do it slowly,' I warn them, meaning every word of it.



XIII

AS I STEP into the cell, the door clangs behind me. There's a rough ironwork bunk on either side of the room; the left one has an occupant. He snorts and wakes, sitting up. He's a huge bear of a man. As the crudely spun woollen blanket falls from his torso, it reveals a mass of hair across his broad chest, shoulders and back. He looks at me in the dim light of the glow globe set behind a grille in the ceiling, his dark eyes almost invisible under a bushy brow. His hair is cropped short on top, as is his full beard, and over his right eye he has a tattoo of a pair of dice, mirrored on his left cheek. He gives a wheezing grunt and swivels further around.

'Welcome to Ghovul,' he says, his voice a hoarse whisper. I ignore him for the moment, sitting myself down on the other bed, nursing the growing bruises on my chest and ribs.

'Guards don't like you then, man,' my cellmate comments, and I look up at him.

'Nobody likes me,' I say quietly. 'I prefer it that way. Puts everybody in the same place. Me and everyone else. Frag, even I don't like me.'

'Thor's teeth, man, I can see you're gonna cheer me up with your witty banter,' the other man grumbles, his fat lips twisted into a sour grimace. 'Name's Marn.'

'Kage,' I say, offering him my hand to shake. As he leans forward, I see he really is hairy pretty much all over. He takes my hand in his massive paw, giving it a firm squeeze which I return. We sit there for a couple of seconds, measuring each other up.

'You're not gonna give me any trouble, man, are you?' he asks, letting go. 'I keep myself to myself, and if you do the same then we'll get along fine.'

'I'm not much for gabbling and gossip,' I reassure him. 'In fact, if these are the last words we say to each other, that wouldn't bother me for a moment.'

'Well,' he replies, rubbing his hand across his head and lying back down again. 'You don't have to go that far, man, but we're cellmates, not friends.'

'Damn right,' I reply, unlacing my boots and placing them neatly under the bed. All my friends are long dead.'

I strip off my socks and shirt, slide under the blanket and close my eyes. I'm weary as a poor infantry footslogger after a week's marching, but sleep won't come. My mind is whirling with recent events. After the Colonel picked me up again, I've been in a holding cell aboard the *Pride of Lothos*. Must have been several weeks travelling, crossed quite a few systems I reckon. I didn't see hide nor hair of the Colonel until I got here, and he was leaving me to rot in this cell.

Emperor knows what he's got in store for me. After all, the last words I heard him say were, 'I can shoot you right now, or I can give you one more Last Chance.' I bloody said yes of course, considering he was pointing a pistol at me at the time. But that's all I know. I've got one more Last Chance. I figure that's another spell in the Colonel's suicide squad, the 13th Penal Legion. Another suicide mission or

two, another chance to get my arse blown off and back again on some hellhole or other, fighting some poxy aliens or heretics who should know better than to try their luck fighting the Emperor's armies. Maybe I'll be blowing up another city, who can tell?

All I know is that if the Colonel wanted me to just rot in a cell, he would have left to rot on that prison planet he first picked me up from. And if he wanted me dead, well then he would have just pulled the trigger and blown my head to bits. He's got something in store, I'm certain of that. But I don't really plan on hanging around for it to happen.

With that in mind, and the droning noise of Marn's snoring, I begin to drift asleep.



THE CLATTER OF bowls and plates fills the mess halls as the inmates sit down with their food. I'm sat on a bench at a long wooden table, twenty of us to each side, the bowl of soup, the hunk of dark bread and the plate of what may once have been meat but now resembles boot leather in front of me. We sit there patiently, waiting. It's about half a minute before Preacher Cleator starts his sermon. He keeps it short, which he normally does, Emperor bless the doddering old fart, and mumbles something about the bounties of faith and the punishments of sin. Just like he has done for the last sixteen days I've been here. He finishes.

'Praise the Emperor,' we all intone solemnly before grabbing up our knives and spoons and tucking in with gusto. The food tastes like crap, but when you only get cold gruel for breakfast and this sump filth twelve hours later, you'll eat whatever they dump in front of you. It's quite varied, to tell the truth. Sometimes the unidentifiable carcass is seared beyond recognition into charcoal, other times it's so bloody and raw I'd swear the fragging thing is probably still breathing.

Never somewhere in between though, never nicely cooked. And the thin, watery spew that passes for soup, well, it probably came out the same animal as all I can say. Doesn't stop me soaking up every last drop with the fist-sized hunk of mud that passes for bread. Better than going hungry, as I learnt from two years of protein chunks on my last tour out with the Last Chancers.

Marn is sat opposite me, wolfig his food down. Thor's blood, but he eats fast. Not an ounce wasted though, it all gets crammed into that maw of his with ruthless efficiency. It's like watching a well-oiled machine at work, both hands working simultaneously, his jaws chewing constantly, barely pausing for split second for him to open his lips and shove another quivering spoonful into his mouth. Thirty seconds and he's done, while I'm barely halfway through the soup, which is piping hot if nothing else. Emperor knows how he stays so big on such meagre rations, because he must weigh at least half as much again as I do.

We all eat in silence; nobody really has anything to say. It's odd, comparing this prison with life on the *Pride of Lothos*. There was upward of two hundred of us in each of those converted holds, and we pretty much hated each others' guts. But we were a fighting unit, we were in squads and platoons, and had some kind of unity from that. We all had our only little groups which we kept to, who we talked to stop ourselves going mental and slashing our own throats or blowing our brains out the next time we went into battle. Well, after a while, I remember when we first got to Ichar IV, the first warzone we were deployed on, there was a good eighty, ninety soldiers topped themselves in the first week. I don't know if that was the effect of fighting the tyranids, or the realisation that they were gonna be stuck in one long war until they died, with no respite and no pardons. Well, no pardons back then, at least.

Here, it's every man for himself. There's you, and a vague bond with your cellmate, and that's it. It's driving me nuts, and no mistaking. I wake up at first light,

well, when the glow globes on the landing outside the cells come on anyway. I never have been a heavy sleeper, I'll wake up at a gnat's cough. I lie there for maybe three hours before breakfast call. Then we're roused out, herded to the hose rooms to get washed down, then we come down here, to the mess hall at the bottom of the tower. It takes forever, only a handful of prisoners and twice as many guards in the lift at one time. It's a really inefficient system for moving large numbers of prisoners around. Perhaps I'll make a complaint to the governor. Anyway, it takes the best part of an hour to get the two hundred or so prisoners into the hall and then we all queue up again for our slop. We sit there while the guards hand out the knives and spoons and the preacher totters about, waving incense around in the rusty old burner that usually hangs from his belt, staining his white robes browny-orange down his left leg. Then it's five minutes to eat up, another wait while they count the knives back in, and gather up the spoons and dishes. Then back in groups of twenty up in the exercise hall on one of the middle levels, for two hours. After that, back to Marn's quiet company for nine hours until the whole meal ordeal is repeated for dinner. Then it's lock up and shut up.

Deacis's holy arse, but I'm bored out of my wits. All my bitching about suicide missions and getting my face blown off aside, I'd much rather be out there with the Colonel doing whatever insane thing it is he's doing, than stuck in here slowly getting older, with my brain dribbling out of my ears. My resolve hardens. Another month here and I'm going to be smashing my grey matter out on the walls of that cell, standing over Marn's ragged corpse, screaming and damning Schaeffer's name to the Abyssal Chaos and back. I have to get out of this fraggering tower.



DAY EIGHTEEN, and my desperation is beginning to grow. Last night, Marn's snoring was driving me insane. I can't sleep as it is, even pushing myself to the limits in the two hours of exercise I'm allowed is nowhere near enough to tire me out. I feel so lethargic and tired, this inactivity is slowly killing me. If the Colonel does come back for me, which I'm starting to doubt more and more with each passing day, I'll be a flabby, useless piece of filth, rather than the fit, lean soldier I was when he brought me in here. Surely he wouldn't let such a good fighter go to waste like that. Anyway, Marn's snoring like a fire klaxon, his wheezing breaths echoing off the walls, driving through my ears right into my brain. I got up, and my fingers were within centimetres of his throat. Hell, he wouldn't have known a thing, my thumbs would've crushed his windpipe before he even woke up. I'd probably be doing him a favour. I must have been stood over him like that for over an hour, resisting that murderous urge.

I work out what anger I can on the sand-filled punch bag, pounding my bare fists into the poorly tanned leather, alternating between imagining Marn's hairy face there and the Colonel's chiselled features. There's just me and them, and I work and work, throwing jabs and crosses, bone-breaking uppercuts, organ splitting body blows, kicks that would burst men's intestines and shatter ribs into dozens of pieces. I picture all this in my mind, and it's easy, because I've done it to real men and see their effects. I imagine the blood flooding from Marn's nostrils as I drive my elbow into what would be the bridge of his nose. I imagine the Colonel collapsing breathless as the middle knuckle of my left hand slams into his abdomen. Over and over, punishing them with my fists and feet, until even my callused knuckles are raw and bleeding, the thick skin scraped off on the clumsily made punchbag. Sweat pours off me in rivulets, I can feel it rolling down my back, splashing all around me as I wallop Marn with a right roundhouse to his bushy eyebrow. My heart's hammering in my chest, the blood coursing through my body, fuelling the destruction of these two hated men.

Suddenly I'm aware of someone stood behind me. I spin on my right heel, fists raised. There's another prisoner there, I've seen him here every day, obviously, but I don't know his name. Marn's the only person here who's name I know. He's a little taller than me, with muscles bulging out of his ragged vest like boulders. He looks like he was carved rather than grown. His bald head is tattooed with blue flames, as are his massive chest muscles and biceps.

'You've been on that for ages. My turn, trooper,' he says, nodding towards the bloodied punch bag. 'I think it realises you don't like it.'

'I'm not finished yet,' I tell him, turning away and taking up my stance again.

'I wasn't asking,' he barks, shoving me to one side, almost knocking me off my feet.

'Frag off, or I'll kill you,' I warn him, squaring up.

'Go play with the others, pretty boy,' he laughs.

He stops laughing when the extended fingers of my right hand slam into his throat. He reels back and I follow up immediately, slamming a left hook into his jaw, his face already reddening from choking, and then catching him under the chin with the heel of my right hand. I hear shouting and chanting start up around me, but don't listen, focussing on this bastard in front of me instead. He flails madly, forcing me to duck, and as I rise, my right fist drives straight into his nose, ripping open a nostril and crunching cartilage. He stumbles back against the bare stone wall and I feel rather than see the other prisoners and the guards forming up around us. Their noise is blocked out by the roar of blood in my ears.

A spinning kick to his midriff hurls him back against the wall as he rebounds towards me, and I get my whole body weight behind the next punch, driving it between his eyes and smashing his head back against the unforgiving stone, leaving a bloody stain as he slumps to one side.

'That's enough,' I hear someone shout and a guard's gloved hand closes around my right wrist. With a simple twist of my

hands, I snap his arm at the elbow, not even turning around, and drive the heel of my left boot into the other prisoner's face again, crushing his jaw and cheek and pounding his head against the wall once more. He flops to the ground and I stamp on his neck for good measure, feeling the crack of his spine snapping like a twig. Then something hard smacks across the back of my neck, stunning me and forcing me to my knees. I see the baton swing across my face and feel a sharp pain across my forehead before I fall unconscious.



XIII

I'M STOOD TO attention in the governor's office again, nursing a bump on my head the size of Terra and still feeling groggy. There's six armsmen in here with me this time, I figure that the governor's not one to take chances.

'I am sure I don't have to tell you that this kind of behaviour is wholly inappropriate, wholly inappropriate to a military facility, whether it be a garrison or a prison,' he tells me. 'I understand well the pressures placed upon our inmates, and that occasionally tempers will flare. In fact, given our population, I expect instances of this kind now and then. We have highly trained, aggressive soldiers penned up here, and fuses can be short on occasion with no outlet for that professional aggression. In most cases, I am lenient and understanding.'

'That's very broad-minded of you, sir,' I say, resisting the urge to rub the bruise on my forehead.

'However,' Skandlegrist continues, with a scowl of annoyance, 'I cannot tolerate the death of another prisoner at your hands. Fighting and brawling I consider an unpleasant but necessary evil of running a vincularum. Murder I do not. Murder, cold-blooded or otherwise, is not an option, and an example will be made of you.'

'That's ridiculous,' I snort, earning another stare from the governor. 'I've been trained to kill. That's what I do. What do you expect? It's the whole point of fighting, isn't it?'

'You are trained to fight and kill under orders, Kage,' snaps the prison governor, standing up, his expression hard. 'You were trained to be a disciplined killer, to exterminate the enemies of the Emperor as ordered by your superior officers. You were not trained to kill every man or woman who happens to disagree with you. You are so far out of line, Kage, and you do not even see it. If I cannot convince you, perhaps the whip can. As the authority of the Imperial Commissariat on this world, I sentence you to two dozen lashes, to be carried out before breakfast tomorrow in front of the other inmates. I could, and would, normally order you executed for this heinous, malicious act, but given the specific orders I received from Colonel Schaeffer that is not an option available to me. Take him away!'

He spins on his heel and clasps his hands behind him, ignoring me as the armsmen grab me by the arms and roughly bundle me out of the room.

'Costaz should get the honour,' one of them says to the others. I remember that name; it was the guard who attacked me in the elevator.

The solemn beat of a drum echoes around the exercise hall, whose walls are lined with the assembled prisoners and guards. At one end, a wooden slab with two chains hanging from thick rings is propped up against the wall, the governor stood next to it. Two guards walk in front of me, with four others behind, my punishment escort. At a slow march, we pace across the hall in time to the drum. I look at the sea of faces, recognising none of them, they're just a blur of different coloured flesh all wrapped up in the same drab grey prison fatigues.

'Prisoner and escort, halt!' commands the governor, his voice surprisingly loud and strong. We all halt, our boots clashing in unity on the bare boards of the floor.

'Prisoner, advance!' the governor orders me forward and I step out sharply, my chin high, looking at the chains on the wooden board. I spread eagle myself against the board, and two guards step forward and clasp the manacles around my wrists, before pulling the chains up, stretching me out, and fastening them to bolts screwed into the top edge of the slab. One of them offers me a leather strap, and I open my mouth and he places it between my teeth. This isn't the first time I've taken a whipping. I know the routine. I bite down hard, vaguely wondering who else's mouth the leather bit has been in.

I hear the clump of the guards' boots as they withdraw and focus my attention on the grain of the wood in front of me. The wood is quite pale, but dark red stains the grooves between the planks, and the deeper areas of grain. There's no mistaking that it's blood, the blood of those who've been punished like this. There are a few score marks above my right shoulder, though I can't think what could have caused them.

It's then that I realise the governor is talking again.

'...in accordance with Imperial Guard regulations,' I hear him finish.

There's a hiss behind me and a short crack a moment before searing pain tears across my shoulder blades as the whip's end opens up a furrow in my skin. I bite harder on the leather, my eyes going wide as agony wracks my back. There'll be no blood trickling down yet, it'll be five or six more before the weals split into cuts and gashes. Another hiss and crack and more pain, this time further down, across the small of my back. It's fleshier down there and the pain seems to spread further around to my sides. I block it out, it's easy at the moment. It was more painful when a tyranid warrior stuck its bonesword through my thigh on Deliverance. It was a hell of a lot more painful when a spore mine exploded in my face, hideously scarring me for the rest of my life and making one side of my face almost totally numb. Another hiss and crack, and pain explodes across my shoulders again. I don't know if it is the guard who attacked

me holding the whip, but whoever he is, he knows his stuff. Four more times the lash rips across my spine before I can feel the trickle of my blood oozing out of the lacerated flesh.

I close my eyes until they water as he carries on, methodically, relentlessly tearing strips of skin and fat from my back. I lose count and open my eyes again, staring deep into the wood, pretending I'm elsewhere as hot pain burns across the whole of my body. In the short pause between blows, I glance up and see blood leaking out of my clenched fists and on to the chain, from where I'm clenching my hands so hard my nails have broken the skin. I relax them, only to tighten my grip even more when the next lash strikes me.

And that's how it goes on until the sentence is carried out. My eyes are watering, my throat is constricted and my heart is hammering in my chest, but not once do I cry out. I take the pain, and I take it deep inside. Storing it away, using it as fuel for myself. My life has been built on pain, pain that I'll throw at my enemies. Pain and agony that I'm saving up for the Colonel. As the guards unfasten the manacles, I give a grunt, the only noise to have passed my lips. It's a grunt of satisfaction, because deep inside that pain is boiling around, and it'll come out one day. One day when the Colonel's throat is in my grip. This is just another episode of pain and hate in the life he's created for me, and I'll pay every second of it back to him. Every second.

**XIII**

IT'S FOUR DAYS of agony before I can even start thinking straight again, laid up in the tower's infirmary, my back swathed in saltwater-soaked bandages. It hurts like a bastard, but the salt will help my tattered back knit itself together. The prison surgeon, some inmate called Stroniberg, had to put a few stitches into the worst of the cuts, but my back was so numb by then I didn't feel a thing. The

day after I'm out of the infirmary, I begin to plot my escape.

There's only one way out of the tower, and that's the roof. If I can get up there, perhaps with a rope or something, I'll be able to scale the outside wall and get to safety. There's one problem. The only way up to the roof is the elevator. I have to find some way of gaining control of the elevator long enough to reach the top. I'm not sure yet how to do that, but I know a weapon of some kind will be needed. I have to work out a way of making a weapon, easily concealed but deadly.

The answer comes to me during dinner the next day. As they've always done, the guards clear away the knives first, keeping careful count of them. I'd never get away with one of them. However, the spoons on the other hand are just cleared away with the rest of the dishes, without too much attention paid to them. At breakfast the day after, I make my move.

Everybody's finishing their gruel, well everybody except my gluttonous cellmate who wolfs his down without taking a breath. Next to me is a slim man, with tawny hair and a drawn face. To be honest I've never noticed him before, I've always sat fixated watching the eating machine on the opposite side of the bench from me. Today, however, he becomes the object of my attention.

I rise to my feet with a roar, smashing his dishes and mine across him.

'What did you say about my mother?' I bellow at him, grabbing him by the collar of his prison vest. He snarls wordlessly at me, and swings a punch which I put my head down into so his fist cracks against the hard part of my brow. I heave him upwards and slam him down onto the table, scattering more bowls and spoons and cold gruel over those nearby. The prisoner opposite and to my right lunges at me across the table, but I drag the skinny guy upward, so the other inmate's punch slams squarely across his face. Letting go of him, I turn to the man on my left, seeing out of the corner of my eye that Marn is starting to lay into the guy who tried to attack me.

Pretty soon, there's seven or eight of them brawling around me. One of them punches me on the chin and I roll with the blow, hurling myself over the bench and rolling under the table. Quickly, I snatch up one of the discarded spoons and shove it into my boot, pulling my fatigues out of them to hide the long handle. I shelter there for about half a minute more, and then emerge as the guards break up the fight. One of them grabs me and pushes me to one side.

'Clear this mess up, troublemaker,' he growls at me, pointing to the broken dishes and scattered cutlery.

'Of course, sir, sorry about that,' I mumble, dropping to my knees and picking up the pieces of cracked pottery and gathering up the spoons. I stand there holding the jumbled mess until another guard turns up with a metal basin and tells me to drop it all in.

'No dinner tonight, Kage,' the guard with the basin tells me. 'If you can't eat without acting like an animal, then you can't eat.'

'Sorry, sir,' I apologise again. 'I'll watch my temper in future.' Inside I'm grinning like a fool. The plan's starting to work.



XIII

IT TAKES THREE nights of furtive labour to file the edge of the spoon's bowl into a sharper blade. The scraping hidden by Marn's snoring, I spend my night hours rasping the spoon back and forth across the bricks of the wall, under my bed so a casual inspection won't see the score marks. Another four days of rubbing, my hands cramping on occasion with holding the thin handle of the spoon, allows me to sharpen the end of the handle into a point. Perfect for piercing throats, lungs and windpipes. With my weapon sorted out, albeit a bit of a crude one, I turn my attention to what I have to do next.

The elevator only stops at a floor when it's time for meals, ablutions or exercise period, and at those times, there's always a bunch of guards and other prisoners around. Certainly too many people for an efficient escape attempt. I need to think of some way to get the guards to make a special visit, only one or two of them preferably, and somehow get them to open the cell door at the same time.

**XIII**

IT'S TWO SLEEPLESS nights listening to Marn's incessant droning snore before the answer comes to me. It brings an ironic smile to my face when I think about it. I rise up in the dim glow through the vision slit in the door and pull my pillow clear from my bed. I stand over Marn, considering my options, and decide this is the best one. I lean down and place the pillow over his face, pushing ever so slightly harder and harder so as not to startle him. He wakes up briefly, eyes staring wide at me in accusation, but lack of breath pushes him into unconsciousness a few seconds later. I pull the pillow off, and check that he's still breathing, but only shallowly. I don't want him dead yet. Taking my makeshift knife from where it's concealed under my mattress, I roll Marn onto his side. I count down his ribs and probe the sharp end of the spoon between the fifth and sixth one, almost effortlessly sliding the point back, puncturing his lung. I let him flop back and then sit on my bed and wait.

It's several minutes before his breathing gets more and more laboured, and then flecks of blood start appearing on his lips. Soon, more is bubbling up into his mouth and I decide it's time to act.

Running to the door I shout through the grille at the guard stationed a few doors down.

'Quick!' I call to him. 'Something's wrong with Marn. I think he's got a pox or something, lungrot maybe.'

The guard stride over towards me, his expression full of suspicion.

'Look for yourself,' I say, backing away from the door. He shines a handlamp through the grille onto Marn, the small circle of light settling on his face and the trickle of crimson from the corner of his mouth. The guard swears and I hear him pound off across the landing. A couple of minutes pass before the clank of the elevator sounds from the shaft, followed by the rusty creaking of the guard opening the doors. It's another tense three or four minutes before the elevator returns.

'Back into the far corner, Kage,' I hear the guard order me, and I do as he says, my hands behind my back concealing the sharpened spoon.

There's a rattle of keys and the door opens. There are three guards stood there, and between them a medical orderly. He's dressed as a trustee, one of the sycophantic inmates who's got extra responsibilities by behaving himself and toadying to the governor or guards. They step inside, and the orderly bends over Marn, checking his breathing. I wait, poised to act, until the guards are looking at my dying cellmate.

Three steps and I've crossed the cell, slashing the blade across the jugular of the guard closest to me, blood fountaining through the gloom. I kick the next guard hard in the chest, hurling him against the wall, and wrap my arm around the startled trustee's throat, the point of the spoon hovering next to his right eyeball. The third freezes where he is, hand hovering over the pistol at his belt.

'One wrong move and he dies,' I snarl as the winded guard clammers to his feet, his face aghast under a thick mop of black hair.

'What the hell are you doing, Kage?' he asks quietly, his eyes straying to the corpse of his comrade.

'Back out onto the landing, meatheads,' I tell them, tightening my grip on the orderly, who squeals on cue.

'You can't go anywhere,' the dark-haired guard continues, trying to circle to my right, but I swivel on my heel,

dragging the trustee with me, to keep him in view.

'I said to stay still!' I snap, ramming the spoon into the orderly's eye, who screeches briefly before collapsing. I hurl the body at the circling guard and dive at the other, who pulls his pistol free a moment before my hands close on his wrist and snap upwards, cracking open the bones in his arm. I snatch the gun from him as he collapses backwards cradling his arm and round on the remaining warden.

'Don't,' I warn him, the muzzle of the pistol aimed squarely between his eyes.

'Drop your weapons,' I say, and he does as he's told, unbuckling his belt and letting it clatter to the ground. 'Now out through the door.' I wave him on his way, darting a glance at the guard with the broken arm, but he's slumped on the floor, whimpering. Hooking his weapons belt over my shoulder, I follow the guard on to the landing.

We make our way over to the elevator and I push him inside before swinging the doors closed behind us. Switching the pistol to my left hand to keep him covered, I crank the lever fully to the right, and the conveyor begins to rumble into motion. Floor by agonising floor we slowly crawl our way up the centre of the tower, the progress of the elevator marked out by an illuminated dial set above the door way. We're twenty floors short when a klaxon starts to sound out, an escape warning.

'They're onto you,' the guard says with satisfaction. 'They've got orders to kill you if you resist. Give yourself up or you'll die.'

'You won't see it,' I tell him, pulling the trigger of the pistol and blowing half his face away. As the gunshot's retort still echoes around me, the elevator creaks to a halt, and then begins to descend again. I try the lever desperately, but there must be some kind of external override. I glance around the conveyor and notice the maintenance access panel in the roof.

Ramming the pistol into my belt, I jump up and smash the panel open. Leaping again, I get a grip on the edge and pull

myself on to the elevator roof. Above me, dimly lit by sparsely placed glow globes, the shaft stretches upwards out of sight. I see the doors to other levels passing me, and walking to the edge, I look down and see light pouring from several entrances not far below me, where the guards have forced the doors open. I can't stay where I am, too much of an easy target.

There's a ladder running the length of the elevator shaft, up the wall just across a small gap. It's no big matter to grab one rung as I slowly descend, and pull myself on to it. Dragging the pistol free, I aim at the receding shape of the elevator's braking block and fire two shots. There's a hiss of hydraulic fluid spraying into the gloom, and the elevator picks up pace, accelerating down the shaft. I've been climbing for several seconds before there's an ear-shattering crash from below as the lift hits the bottom of the shaft.

I haul myself upwards as fast as I can, more light pours into the shaft from opened doors above and below me. Something ricochets off the wall next to me, accompanied by the sharp crack of a pistol. Soon more bullets are flying, tracers amongst them, some of them passing close by, others way off. The guards can't really see me. They're aiming blind. I pull myself up a few more floors, the fire pinging and screaming around me, and then pause for breath. At that moment, the door on the opposite side swings open, and I hang there face to face with two trustees and a couple of guards.

I react first, bringing up the pistol and emptying the clip into them, punching them off their feet in a hail of bullets. The shots at me intensify from above, and I swing off the ladder into a small maintenance alcove just to my left. Crouched there, I discard the empty pistol and pull the other free from the belt, throwing that down the shaft as well.

I crouch at the edge of the alcove, and fire a few shots upwards, aiming for the rectangles of light that indicate the open doors above me. There's a scream and a guard comes toppling out, falling past me. Realising that it's only a matter of time before they get me if I stay here, I jump

back on to the ladder and carry on climbing.

My shoulders and arms burn as I drag myself up rung by rung, the wounds in my back opening again and causing blood to trickle down onto my fatigues and soaking my vest. I pause occasionally to fire at the shapes of guards I see peering and shooting from the open doors above, and by keeping their heads down in this way make good progress.

I've climbed perhaps two dozen floors when the elevator chain begins to grind into action once more, so I figure the crash didn't take it out of commission permanently. I redouble my efforts, pulling myself up rung by rung, trying to outrun the approaching lift whilst also firing up at the opening above me.

More shots flare around me from below, and I glance down and see firing through the open work elevator roof, about ten storeys below me. I fire back down at them, trapped in a horrid crossfire. Swinging desperately from the ladder, I wait until the elevator is just a few floors below, before jumping off the ladder, firing down as I leap on to the roof. I land with a clang of boots and roll automatically, falling through the open maintenance hatch into the midst of the guards inside.

I fire the pistol point blank into the gut of one and twist, bringing the butt of the pistol smashing across the face of another. I punch a third in the throat, crippling his breathing. Another already lies on the floor, holes stitched across his chest. I stand there panting as the lift grinds its way upward, taking me to the top of the tower.

Just before I reach the last level, I ram the lever into the halt position and the brakes squeal in protest before the elevator comes to a stop. Climbing out onto the lift's roof once more, I pull myself up to the doors to the roof. Now with two more pistols claimed from the guards lying dead and unconscious in the lift, I brace myself on the inside of the door, trying to detect any movement on the far side. I hear and see nothing.

I crash my shoulder against the doors and they fly open, a guard on the far side giving a startled yelp as one of them

smashes into him. I roll through the opening, arms crossed, firing the pistols to either side of me, before coming to my feet and spinning around, the guns blazing in my hands. Three more corpses litter the floor behind me as I sprint out onto the roof.

There's a massive storm raging, lightning flickers all around and thunder rolls. The wind howls across the tower, stinging my flesh and whipping up a cloud of dust and grit. Behind me I hear more shouts, and realise that there are more wardens spilling from the guardhouse. I pay no heed, and run for the edge. I'll climb down by hand if I have to.



XIII

IJUMP UP onto the parapet that runs around the tower roof and stop. In the light of the storm, I look out over Ghoul. Far below me, the tower stretches down onto a rocky mesa. Beyond that is a flat, featureless plain. Everything is grey and rocky, with no shelter from the elements, no cover to hide in, nothing to drink from, nothing to eat, just barren rock and gravel. As far as the eye can see. Distant lightning shows me that the plain stretches on far into the distance. There are no hills, no mountains, nothing, just a massive expanse of desolation.

There's nowhere to go.

I hear shouts from behind me and shots whine past. I raise my hands above my head and let the pistols fall from my fingertips, feeling numb.

Nowhere to go, nothing to do except wait here for the Colonel.

The Colonel. As I think about him, the pain flares up inside me, the burning anger builds in my gut and chest. I clench my fists above me as the guards close in, and scream into the storm.

'Schaeffer!' I shriek. 'Come back here, you bastard!' 

HONOUR THE CRAFT OF DEATH

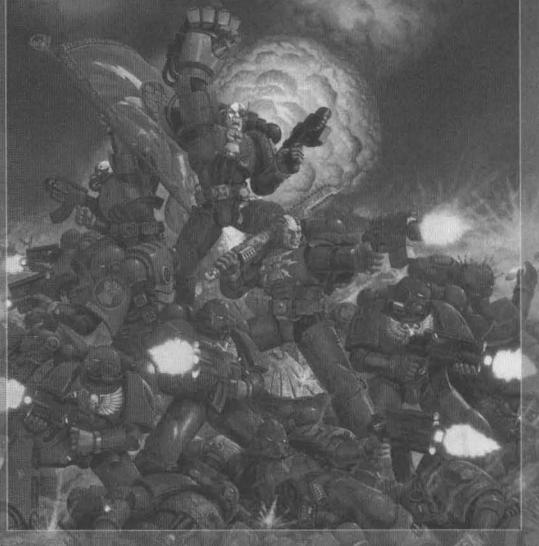


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THE LORDS OF Death have but one apparent purpose, which is to raise armies of skeletons, zombies, wraiths and ghouls to fight against the living. There are many philosophers among the living who consider the Lords of Death to be essentially stupid, and their purpose essentially futile. They argue this case on the grounds that the living are bound to die soon enough, whether they do so in battle or in bed, while the dead are far too numerous already to be in urgent need of further company. There are also philosophers among the dead, however, who take a natural delight in the solution of such paradoxes. They declare that the duration of life is an irrelevance by comparison with the manner of its progress and that if life is merely one phase in the long career of a soul, as the existence of armies of the dead surely proves, then it might matter a great deal how the living enter the state of death. Equally important, according to the philosophers of the dead, are the ways in which the living are prepared for death, and the kinds of future that might be mapped out for them thereafter.

Living philosophers are sometimes wont to claim that the central question of philosophy is 'how should men live?' Dead philosophers, not unnaturally, think differently. Were their world a mere mirror of its counterpart, the central question would become 'how should men die?' but that is not the case. Since even the unquiet dead are, by definition, already dead – although victims of an understandable confusion sometimes prefer to call them 'undead' – they take up a more pragmatic viewpoint, which is also more sophisticated. They prefer to ask 'how should the dead assist the living to reap the rewards of death?' – and this, of course, is where the Lords of Death and the

Emperors of Necromancy enter into the equation.

Although the living tend to think of battles between their own armies and the armies of the dead as matters of unholy enmity between opposites, only the most imbecilic among the dead think in similar terms. The philosophically-inclined dead think of these conflicts as the entirely natural intercourse of the dead-but-active and the active-but-not-yet-dead, by which the former attempt to embrace the latter and initiate them into the mysteries of their own condition. From the point of view of the philosophical dead, therefore, the crusades waged by their lords are not matters of bitter warfare but affairs of enthusiastic reproduction – which might be as joyous as the kinds of reproduction in which the living indulge, were it not for the fact that the living insist on crying 'foul!'. Given that there never was an army of the living whose extra-curricular amusements did not result in profuse cries of alarm from variously threatened womwnfolk, one might expect them to be more understanding, but stupidity is certainly no monopoly of the dead.

The Lords of Death are mostly practical individuals who are more interested in mass murder than in self-justification, but there are a few of them who deem this narrow-mindedness a tragedy, and firmly believe that if only the dead would take the trouble, they could do much more to help the living understand the rewards of death, and thus make them more appreciative of their necessary fate.



THE GREATEST OF all the Emperors of Necromancy is, of course, Nagash, the Supreme Lord of Death and the architect of the Great Awakening. He resides now in Nagashizzar, the Cursed Pit, but he was born in Khemri, the most splendid of the ancient cities of Nekehara, where he raised the Tomb Kings from their long sleep to serve as his disciples in the Great Crusade Against the Living.

The Tomb Kings are more numerous and more various than the living probably imagine, and the fiefdoms they have established within the barren circle whose circumference the Marshes of Madness, the Black Tower and the city of Quatar are just as numerous and just as various. There is no denying that the greater number of them are not at all philosophically inclined, and by no means intellectually blessed, but there are a few Tomb Kings who take a greater interest than their fellows in matters philosophical, and there is one among them who takes such matters seriously enough to ask questions which are deemed slightly heretical by the majority of his peers. He is the Lord of the Necropolis of Zelebzel, and his name is Cimejez.

Cimejez is by no means an unviolent creature, and he has certainly played his part in the Great Crusade. Because Zelebzel is located in the far west of the Land of the Dead, in the desert borderlands which separate that land from Araby, his armies have abundant opportunities to meet their counterparts. It is by no means unknown for the rulers of Araby to raise armies with which to mount crusades of their own, and Zelebzel has borne the brunt of more than one such incursion. Nagash has never had any cause to complain about the zeal with which Cimejez has conducted his own expeditions or repelled those sent against him. This undoubtedly helps to explain why the Supreme Lord of Death has always been tolerant of the occasional eccentricities of his follower – but it must also be the case that Nagash approves, if only slightly, of Cimejez's attempts to build better bridges between the worlds of Life and Death.

One of Cimejez's eccentricities is the taking of prisoners, which armies of the dead are usually disinclined to do. The dead have little need of living slaves, and no interest at all in sexual congress with the living, so there is no obvious reason for Lords of Death to make captives of their adversaries. Cimejez makes an exception because he is a philosopher, and likes to debate philosophy with the living – although it is, admittedly, rare that he can find one among a hundred randomly-accumulated prisoners who is capable, despite his terror, of taking part in a half-way competent argument. Imagine his delight, therefore, when he returned from one of his raids into territory held by Araby with a famous vizier named Amaimon, who had been travelling in a diplomatic camel-train from one emirate to another, charged with a mission of the utmost delicacy.



CIMEJEZ TOOK some delight in displaying to his unwilling visitor the treasures of Zelebzel, which had been accumulated by the best-informed tomb-robbers in history. He had decorated sarcophagi by the score, statues and paintings by the hundred, and thousands of gem-encrusted objects moulded in gold, silver and brass. It was another of the Tomb King's eccentricities to accumulate such useless objects, which most of the Lords of Death disdained to possess on the grounds that they had risen far above such worldly concerns.

'Is there a museum to match this in all the world?' Cimejez asked Amaimon, grinning his rictus smile. 'Has any living man a collection to rival its grandeur?'

'I have not seen or heard of one,' Amaimon told him. 'But I think the living take more pleasure in the works of art they possess.'

'Why, certainly,' said Cimejez. 'Pleasure is a prerogative of the living, which is greatly over-rated by them. Do you not think, though, that there is a certain perversity in taking pleasure in such things as gems, statues and painted images? Do you not

think that the dead have a purer and more refined notion of their quality and value?’

‘Purer and more refined?’ Amaimon echoed. ‘Well, perhaps – in the sense that skeletons are purer for the lack of flesh, and wraiths more refined for the lack of substance. Gems are inert, and I suppose there is a certain crucial lack of activity in statues and paintings too – but look at that marble statue of a dancing-girl. I will believe, if you demand it of me, that your kind might have a better appreciation of its whiteness and its stillness, but I cannot believe that you can appreciate the significance of its pose, or the impression it gives of graceful movement. Yes, it is a single moment of frozen time, like death itself; but captured in that moment is the exuberant flow of life with which its human model was gifted. As a bleached white thing yourself, Lord Cimejez, you might feel a particular kinship with the statue’s marble substance, but only a living man can see the dance that has crystallized within it.’

‘Do you think that the dead do not understand dancing?’ Cimejez replied, astonished. ‘I can assure you that we do. Indeed, I can assure you that my kind are the only ones who understand the true nature and artistry of the dance.’

Had Amaimon been a less well-travelled man he might not have understood the import of this statement, but he had been sent far and wide as an emissary of more than one emir. He had even visited the Empire, and therefore knew of the fashion within the Empire for depicting the Totentanz or Dance of Death, in which death appears in the symbolic form of a skeleton – a skeleton not unlike Lord Cimejez of Zelebzel, in fact – leading a train of dancers, each one holding the hand of the next.

The point of this representation, Amaimon knew, was to stress the common cause of all humanity against the ravages of fate, by including in the train a wide range of social types: men and women; young and old; rich and poor; knights and priests; merchants and soldiers; scholars and serving-maids. It had not previously occurred to Amaimon that there might actually be dancing in the Land of the Dead – who, after all, would be led away in a Totentanz in such a place as Zelebzel?

– but he wondered now whether the image might have some representational value above and beyond the merely symbolic?

On the other hand, it was quite possible that Cimejez was talking about something far more like the kind of dancing that the living enjoyed. In either case, Amaimon thought, surely the Lord of Death had to be wrong about the superiority of the dead, whether as dancers or as connoisseurs of the art.

‘I refuse to believe that the dead can dance as well as the living,’ Amaimon said to the Tomb King. ‘They have neither the grace nor the ability to generate the artistic meanings of which a human dancer is capable. I would stake my life on it.’

‘Your life has already been staked and lost,’ Cimejez pointed out, ‘but I do not mind a contest to settle the manner and timing of its delivery.’

‘Alas,’ said Amaimon, ‘I have no champion to carry forward my cause. There was no dancing-girl among the prisoners your soldiers took, although there were a few musicians.’

‘Must it be a girl?’ asked Cimejez.

‘I think so,’ the vizier replied.

‘Then you must tell me where to find the one you want. I shall send an army to fetch her.’

Amaimon had not expected this, and he certainly did not want to be the cause of yet another army of the dead descending upon a town in Araby, so he thought hard and fast about what to do next. Eventually, he said: ‘That will not be necessary. Fortunately, I have a certain skill in magic, which I have always been loth to use because I have seen what the exercise of magic tends to do to the faces and souls of men. Given that my life is already forfeit to you, I see no harm in making an exception. I am prepared to bring this very statue to life for an hour, in order that the artistry that went into its making may be liberated in performance. Have you a champion here to set against her?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Cimejez. ‘There is not another Lord of Death who could say so, but I have a champion of that kind.’

'But how are we to judge the result?' Amaimon said, dubiously. 'Can you provide an impartial jury?'

'That will not be easy,' Cimejez admitted. 'We might achieve neutrality by taking an equal number of living humans from among the prisoners seized with you and dead ones from among the ranks of my soldiers, but what if a deciding vote were needed? We would need at least one juror with a foot in each camp, so to speak – and if we had one such, we could probably dispense with the rest. Since you have been generous enough to use your own magic to give my statue an hour of life, however, I ought to match your offer by using some of mine, so this is what I propose. Will you accept your own champion as the judge, if I make provision to give her the choice between life and death when your hour expires? If I can offer her a choice between a continuation of the life that you have restored to her, or the opportunity to become a dancer of the same kind as the rival against which she has been pitted, will you accept her decision as an indubitable judgment of superiority?'

Amaimon thought about this offer for a moment or two, but it seemed to him that he would have the advantage, so he agreed. 'And what am I to stake, given that my fate is already in your hands?' he asked.

'That is easy enough,' Cimejez said. 'Should you win, I will let the dancer go, so that the life she has reclaimed can be spent among her own kind. Should you lose, you will become my vizier, and serve me – both before and after your death – as cleverly and as loyally as you have served any living emir.'

Amaimon thought about that too, but again it seemed to be a very good bargain, given that he was already lost. He was already among the dead, and would soon be dead himself, so what else could he hope for but a position of honour and privilege among the dead?

'You are very generous, my Lord,' he said. 'I am glad to accept.'

'The dead do not reckon generosity in quite the same terms as the living,' Cimejez told him, 'but it is good that you are satisfied. If you will work your magic while

I summon my court, we can begin the contest as soon as you are ready.'



CHE DANCING girl's name was Celome. She told Amaimon, when his metamorphic magic had reincarnated her in place of the statue whose model she had been, and her initial shock had waned somewhat, that she had danced in the court of King Luvah of Chemosh, in the long-gone days when Nekehara had been an empire of the living, before its fertile fields had turned to arid desert.

Celome had never been taught to dance; hers was a spontaneous art born of inspiration and nurtured by a natural process of growth. She had danced because dancing was the most natural expression of her vitality, and had danced well enough to win the favour of a king who was known throughout ancient Nekehara as a true connoisseur of that art.

Amaimon was delighted to hear all this. He explained to Celome that she must take part in a competition against a dancer representing the world of the dead – which some called the world of the undead – but that Celome herself would have the privilege of judging the winner.

'I have heard that serpentine lamias are fine dancers,' she said, dubiously. 'I heard, too, that one of King Luvah's courtiers was visited in his dreams by a dancing succubus which charmed the vital fluids from his body. But the real risk is that I might be matched against a wraith who was a famous dancer while she was alive and is now even lighter on her feet.'

'That is a possibility,' Amaimon conceded, 'but the whole point of the wager is to pit the dance of life against the dance of death. I do not think that Cimejez will pick a champion on the grounds that he or she pleased a human audience while alive. You might be surprised by the nature of your rival – but you will be the judge. You have only to desire to continue to be yourself, to live in Araby as you once lived in Chemosh.'

'I cannot imagine wishing anything different,' Celome told him. 'I am a dancer through and through; it is what I am.'

'Good,' said Amaimon.

He was not so pleased by the musicians who had been captured along with him, whose skills were very ordinary indeed and made worse by their abject terror at their predicament, but Celome thought they would be adequate to her needs. She picked out a zither-player, a cymbalist and a drummer, and Amaimon tried to impress upon them the importance of their task.

'Let us show these reanimated corpses what it means to be alive,' he said to the four of them, as they made ready to take the floor. 'Let us demonstrate our love of life. If you can dance as I believe you can, Celome, you might remind them what they have lost, and reintroduce these paradoxical beings to the bittersweetness of honest regret. That is my hope, at least.'

'Mine too,' she said, 'if there is life to be won.' She had found a costume in one of the treasure-chests in Cimejez's museum, which seemed to her appropriate to her purpose. The instrumentalists swore that they would do their best to assist her.



CIMEJEZ HAD assembled a huge audience for the contest, which he distributed around the great hall of his palace. All the living prisoners recently taken by his army were brought from their cells, and all the soldiers which had taken part in the campaign against them were there too, along with the Lord of Death's ministers, household servants and junior sorcerers.

'You are the challenger,' Cimejez said to Amaimon. 'Your champion must take the first turn.'

'Go to it,' said Amaimon to Celome. 'Make the dead ashamed of their condition, and remind them what it was to be alive.'

And that is what Celome did. She threw herself into the arena and performed the legendary Dance of the Seven Veils.

The vulgar, who have only heard rumour of it, mistakenly think of the Dance of the Seven Veils as a mere strip-

tease, but it is far more than that, for each of the seven veils has its own symbolism and each ritual removal is part of a progress from misery to ecstasy. Each garment represents a curse; as each one is discarded, the dancer advances towards a uniquely joyous kind of freedom.

The zither-player, the cymbalist and the drummer had all played the music of the Dance of the Seven Veils before, albeit for performances of a slightly less exalted and terrifying nature. They contrived to get the notes in the right order, and Celome communicated some of her own inspiration to them, so that they improved markedly as the performance progressed.

The first curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is hunger – which, for the purpose of the dance, includes and subsumes thirst. The first phase of Celome's interpretation was, therefore, the embodiment in body-language of that most fundamental of appetites which shapes the successful quest of the new-born infant for a mother's milk and a mother's love.

The second curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is cold, so the second phase of Celome's version was the embodiment in movement of the need for clothing and shelter and of its eventual achievement.

The third curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is disease – which, for the purpose of the Dance of the Seven Veils, also embraces injury – so the third phase of Celome's performance comprised a symbolic celebration of the power of the body to heal itself, and the wisdom of physicians.

The fourth curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is loneliness, so the fourth phase of Celome's mime was a hymn of praise to society and amity, and the productive rewards of co-operative labour.

The fifth curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is loss, so the fifth phase of Celome's rendition was a demonstration of the agony of grief, which gave way by degrees to the triumph of resolution and the recognition of all the legacies which the dead convey to the living.

The sixth curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, is childlessness, so the sixth phase – the longest so far – of Celome's extravaganza was a celebration of sexual love, marriage and parenthood.

Amaimon watched all these phases with the critical eye of a connoisseur, and found little to criticise. It was easy enough to see that Celome had not been trained in the conventional devices of Arabic dancing, but it was equally obvious that her spontaneity and exuberance made up for the omission. She was authentically gifted, and her appeal to the emotions of her audience was no less powerful because it lacked a certain refinement and sophistication. Whatever imperfection remained in the playing of her accompanists was easily ignored; the dancer was the only centre of attention, the sole contestant. The living members of the audience followed her with their eyes, utterly captivated by her every movement.

On the other hand, Amaimon could see that the dead were quite unimpressed. Many of the skeletons, most of the zombies and all of the ghouls in the crowd had two good eyes, while the wraiths had more glittering stares than their inhabiting souls could ever have manifested in the flesh. They could all see well enough what Celome was doing, and even the notorious stupidity of death could not have prevented them from understanding the greater part of it – but Amaimon could see that they were unresponsive. They must have been reminded of life, but seemingly not in any way that made them regret its loss.

They did not seem to care at all.

Perhaps, Amaimon thought, that was because they could not care – but he was reluctant to believe it. Dead or not, they had been raised to action, subjected to motive force. Given that they had the capacity to respond to motive force, they ought to have the capacity to respond to the art of the dance. The problem was to reach and activate that potential.

There was still one phase of the dance to be completed, and Amaimon knew that whatever hope he had rested on that – but he suspected that the final phase might

seem a trifle offensive to the audience gathered in the palace of Zelebzel, because the final curse afflicting human life, according to the Dance of the Seven Veils, was death itself: not the death of others, as per the fifth curse, but the death of the individual. The final act of Celome's drama was supposed to consist of a heroic defence of creative achievement and a defiant statement of the fact that although a body and mind might be annihilated, the legacy of their attainments could not.

Celome did as well as anyone in her situation could have done. The last and longest phase of the dancing-girl's masterpiece was a celebration of dancing itself, its joy and its meaning; its consummation and climax was the removal of the final veil, and the revelation of the human being beneath, utterly triumphant over every single one of the many indignities which cruel fate had heaped upon her kind. Even her accompanists excelled themselves.

When Celome fell still at last the captive prisoners, all of whom were already in tears, burst into a storm of applause and acclamation – but the dead remained silent. They did not seem to be bored, but neither were they in the least appreciative.

But that does not matter, Amaimon told himself. For they are not the judges who will decide this matter. Celome is the judge, and there was not one among the living observers who enjoyed watching her performance one tenth as much as she enjoyed giving it.

When Celome looked up and met Amaimon's eye he saw that she was pleased with what she had done, and was reassured. Cimejez beckoned to her, then indicated that she should take the empty seat beside Amaimon. The vizier briefly took her hand in his, and squeezed it slightly before releasing it again, by way of congratulation.

Then Cimejez's champion took the floor.



C ELOME'S RIVAL was, as Amaimon had half-expected, exactly the kind of figure depicted in the art of the Empire: the leader of the Totentanz. He was a skeleton, but not any ordinary skeleton. He was an imperious skeleton, with an eyeless face and perfect teeth set in the permanent smile of the long-dead. He wore a jet-black cape with a hood, and he carried a scythe.

The zither-player, the cymbalist and the drummer had already retired to join the other captives. Their place was taken by a single drummer; also a skeleton attired in a monkish robe – but when he began to caress his instrument with his slender fingers the rhythm he sounded was more signal than dance-beat. Amaimon recognised it as a chamade: the summons used by exhausted armies to call for truce and negotiation.

There were no veils in this performance, no curses and no alleviations. It had only one phase, and even that had no hint of a crescendo.

It occurred to Amaimon, as he watched the skeleton move to the rhythm of the chamade, that he had never been able to make out what kind of dance the Totentanz was. Like the statue of Celome, the carved images of the dance that he had seen in Altdorf and Marienburg had been frozen moments decanted from an unfolding process, but while his human eyes had read an implicit flow and surge into the statue he had been unable to do likewise for the leader of the Totentanz. Now, for the first time ever, he was able to see the evolution and revolution of the Dance of Death, and to understand not merely where it led but how and why.

There were no phases in the Dance of Death because death had no phases. There were no curses in the dance of death because death was devoid of afflictions. There were no veils in the Dance of Death because death could neither deceive nor conceal its essence. There were neither triumphs nor celebrations in the Dance of Death, because death was all triumph, and had no need of any celebration. The Dance of Death was slow, and painstakingly measured, and eternal. The Dance of Death was an inexorable and inescapable summons, whose promise was more truce than release. That summons, addressed by the exhausted to the exhausted, gathered in

everyone and everything... except the dead.

Life, according to the symbolism of the black-clad figure's awesomely patient and painstakingly measured steps, was a struggle against fate. It had its victories – which were, admittedly, the only victories conceivable. In death, by contrast, there was no struggle; there were no victories, because none was needed. That was the meaning of the chamade, and the meaning of the dance it accompanied.

Amaimon realised, before the skeleton had made a single circuit of the arena, that he could not win his wager. He could not win because his opponent did not need to win; he had to lose because he was the only one who could lose.

Amaimon realised, without needing to feel the slackness of her hand in his, that Celome would come to understand this too. She had not been able to imagine wanting to be anything other than she was, because that was all she had ever been before she was a statue; she was a dancer through and through. But the failure was in her imagination; she had never seen, imagined or understood the Totentanz. She was watching it now, and she understood exactly how its rhythm intruded itself into the human eye, ear and mind, like a possessive daemon banishing all rival thought and sensation.

Amaimon's fellow prisoners had stopped cheering, but they were joining in the dance.

Soon enough, even Celome was dancing again – but not, this time, the Dance of the Seven Veils.

Now the scythe came into play. As the column of figures wound around and around, doubling back on itself again and again, the scythe offered its blade to the dancing mortals. Hand-in-hand as they were, they could offer no resistance to its seeking blade, but they did not flinch or turn away as it sliced through their flesh and drained them dry of blood. The flesh began to melt from their bones soon enough, as if the dull music of the signal-drum were a fire of sorts, and their whited bones a kind of ash.

Celome made no more effort to avoid her fate than the zither-player, the cymbalist or the drummer, who seemed to be a little more appreciative of the rhythm to which

they danced than the unmusical majority of their erstwhile companions.

'That is what the dead have to offer the living,' Cimejez whispered in Amaimon's ear. 'That is what might be attained, if only the living would try harder to understand the nature of the Great Crusade.'

Amaimon was the only living person present who was able to resist the summons of the chamade. He stayed where he was, in his seat beside Cimejez the Tomb King – but the only reason for that was that the careful Lord of Death had rested a bony hand upon his own, forbidding him to move. The pressure was gentle, but it was irresistible. Amaimon was the only living man who was ever privileged to see and hear the Totentanz without being required to join it – and for that reason, he became the only living man in the world who understood the strategy and the objectives of the Great Crusade.

The most remarkable thing about the continuing dance was the reaction of the remainder of the crowd to the performance they were watching. They did not applaud, nor did they sway in time to the rhythm. They remained utterly silent – not bored, but not appreciative either. They had been reanimated to serve as warriors in the Great Crusade Against the Living; they had been given armour, and weapons, and a cause – but the motive force that impelled them to take up arms against the living was nothing like the motives that forced the living to act. Their motive force was like the Totentanz itself, to which they made no evident response because they had no need.

The dead had no need to follow the paces of the dance, or even to approve of them, for the dance was merely a reflection of their nature, like a shadow carelessly cast upon the ground.

'You ought to let me go now,' Amaimon said to Cimejez. 'I have seen all I need to see. I admit that I have lost. I will serve as your vizier – but you should let me go, so that I might join my peers in the Totentanz.'

'Oh no,' said Cimejez, amicably. 'That would not do at all – for then you would be merely one of us, instead of a traitor to the living. The dead have a tendency to become stupid, even when they are recalled by a necromancer as expert as myself. You'll pay out your bargain in blood, sweat and tears,

but you'll do it as I require and command.'

So Amaimon stayed where he was, and watched the dance. It seemed to go on forever, but when it was over he had lost far less time than it took a human to be born, let alone to die.



TN THE LONG, hard years of servitude that followed, Amaimon discovered that the first curse afflicting human life is indeed hunger – which, for accounting purposes, might be taken to include and subsume thirst. He discovered, too, the scrupulous accuracy of the estimated hierarchy of needs that had ranked cold the second, disease and injury the third, loneliness the fourth, loss the fifth and childlessness the sixth. He suffered all of these afflictions in their fullest measure, but he was not allowed to die. He helped bring death to hundreds of thousands of the living, and he helped bring the greater number of those he had betrayed into the ranks of Cimejez's army, but he was not allowed the kind of release he devoutly desired, nor any other kind.

Amaimon never forgot that the final curse afflicting human life is the inevitability of death itself, at least according to the Dance of the Seven Veils – but he could find little comfort in the recollection, even though the final phase of Celome's performance was etched so deeply in his memory as to be replayed over and over again in his restless dreams.

He still knew that the sum and climax of his existence, like that of any human being, was supposed to consist of a heroic defence of creative achievement, and of the ultimate inability of annihilation to cancel out the produce of a busy lifetime. Alas, that knowledge had become worthless to him as soon as he had seen a single round of the Totentanz – and worthless it remained to Amaimon the Vizier of Zelebzel, if not to those Lords of Death whose one and only purpose is to raise armies of skeletons, zombies, wraiths and ghouls to fight against the living. ♦

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AWARE THAT I'M JUST A
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BLINDLY FROM HIS ASSIG-
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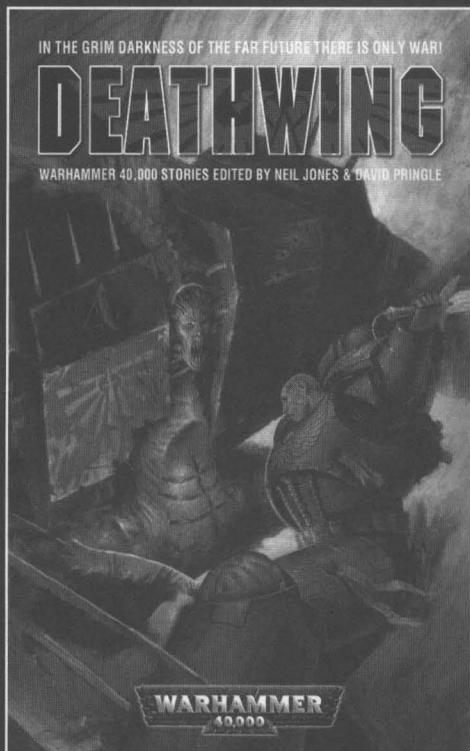
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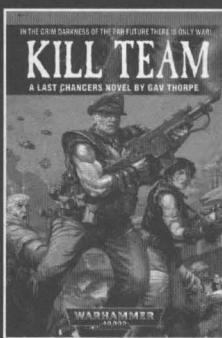
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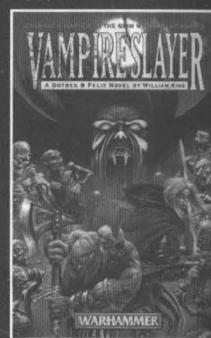
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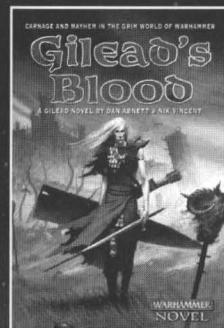


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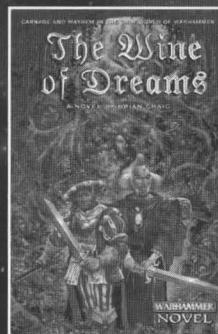
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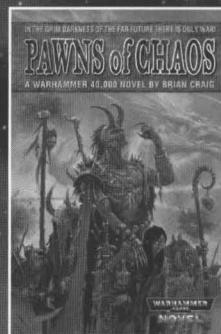
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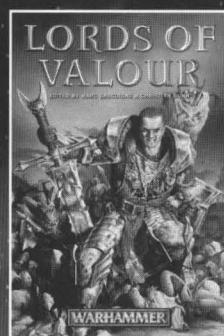
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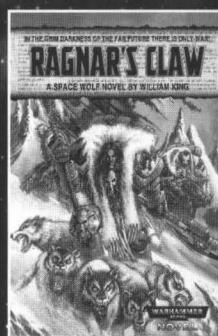
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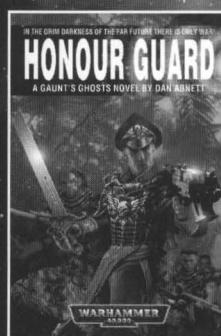
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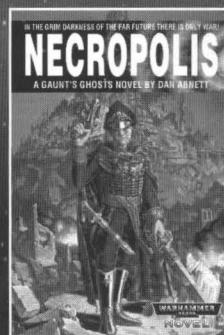
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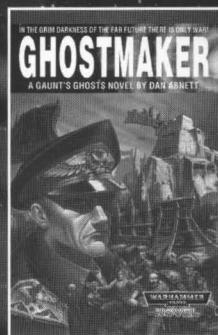
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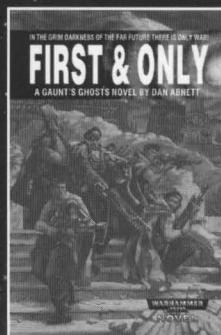
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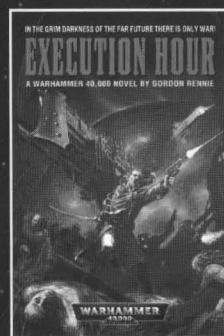
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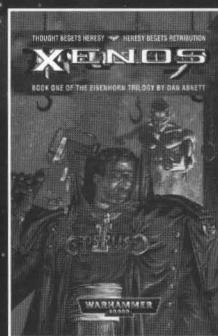
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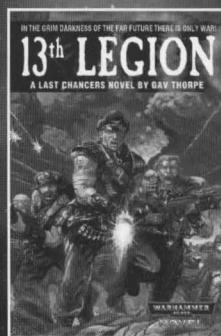


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I threw myself flat as shots tore out the wall plaster behind me. At some point Fischig and Midas burst in, weapons blazing. I saw three or four veterans drop, sliced through by silent needles and another six tumble as shotgun rounds blew them apart.

• THE NAGENHOF BELL by Jonathan Green

Behind the skaven, at the back of the church, a huge shape detached itself from the shadows and moved towards Torben and himself with ungainly strides. Before the monstrous creature even moved within range of the guttering light from Torben's discarded lantern the soldier recognised the creature for what it was. The massive, distorted physique, the over-long talons, the muscles like ships' cables, the inflamed boils covering its hairy hide, the spikes protruding from the malformed vertebrae of its spine, the huge rodent head, the brands burnt into its flesh, the scar running from one shoulder down across its breastbone – the scar he had given it in return for the hand the beast had taken from him!

• TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT by Christian Dunn & Richard Elson

THE PUPPET MASTER'S TALE

'The next morning all that was found in the burned out remains of the master puppeteer's caravan was his bag of puppets.'

• LIBERTY by Gav Thorpe

The prisoner stumbled, recovered his footing and then smashed the extended fingers of his right hand into Shrank's face, who fell away screaming, clutching at his eyes. Frentz swung a right-handed punch, but the guardsman easily swayed to his left, delivering a short kick to the prison officer's knee that made it snap the wrong way, tumbling him to the ground with shrieks of agony.

• TOTENTANZ by Brian Craig

The zither-player, the cymbalist and the drummer had already retired to join the other captives. Their place was taken by a single drummer, also a skeleton attired in a monkish robe – but when he began to caress his instrument with his slender fingers the rhythm he sounded was more signal than dance-beat. Amaimon recognised it as a chamade: the summons used by exhausted armies to call for truce and negotiation.

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